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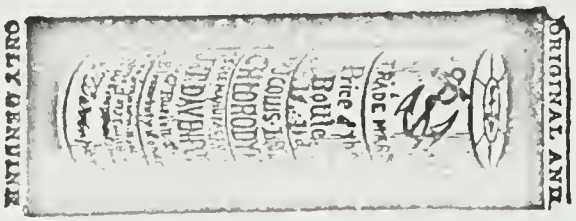

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CHAPTER I.

"IT is very nice of you to—to like me, Mr. Linton!"

"I don't merely like you—I love you, Hilda, with my whole heart and soul!"

"I cannot understand why," the girl answered musingly, without a touch of embarrassment in either speech or manner. "I cannot in the least see why you should—love me, Mr. Linton; still it is very nice. I had never heard a kind word since I was quite a child until you came here."

Victor Linton's fair boyish face flushed and his lips quivered.

"Poor little Hilda—to have received kindness from no one but a nurse, an Indian ayah! I never had much faith in the genuineness of East Indians, but I shall think well of them in future because one was good to you."

"Oh, don't pity me—anything but that!" The girl's dark eyes flashed ominously. "I should prefer a slap in the face to being pitied. The girls at the school begin 'psalm-singing' sometimes, and I feel that I could kill them. I suppose you will end by hating me very soon? Miss Morgan says that I have a heathenish temper, and that I am a daughter of Satan!" she added drearily.

"Miss Morgan ought to be ashamed of herself. The idea of a schoolmistress using such abominable language to one of her charges!"

"Well, you see, I called her an old witch," Hilda said naively; "I couldn't help it! She is so exasperating with her maxims and proverbs for the tiniest, teeniest little irregularity!"

"'Irregularity' is politic," laughed Victor Linton. "What wicked-

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ness does it not cover? But, seriously, I think that Miss Morgan should be taught to moderate her language. I will speak to the Rector. He takes the class in Divinity—doesn't he?—and he and I are great friends already. A well-timed rebuke——"

Hilda's eyes were alight with amusement.

"Foolish Mr. Linton! Don't you know that Miss Morgan annihilates the timid Rector with a glance? Besides, the dear old gentleman has already given me several lectures." The girl shook her head doubtfully. "I wonder sometimes if I am really as bad as they say I am. I really am afraid that my case is hopeless! Miss Morgan declares that I am wilful, disobedient, and wicked, and that, as I am the biggest and oldest girl in the school, my example is most demoralising. I think that I should be inclined to be penitent if she were less of a humbug."

The dark eyes flashed wrathfully. The young man pressed a lock of the girl's raven hair to his lips, and kissed it hastily. Hilda flushed from annoyance, and drew farther away from him.

"Why will you be so silly, Mr. Linton? I have told you before that I don't like that sort of thing! I want to believe you to be brave and manly; I am sure that you are big enough to know better!"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Carrington," Victor said in mock dismay; "but I couldn't help it—really! If I may be so bold as to remind you, you thought it the usual thing for lovers to kiss each other."

"But we are not lovers. What a horrid idea!"

"Not lovers? And we have been meeting in secret for weeks! Not lovers? And your witchery has enchained me to these Welsh mountains when I ought to be grinding at my desk in London! For your sake I have deceived my dear old governor into believing I am ill and require a long holiday! I have stooped to shameful deception, then, all for nothing?"

The girl gazed at him with startled eyes.

"Didn't I tell you how it would be from the very first?" she asked miserably. "I am a wretch, and I always bring trouble! But it was so nice to have one friend—one person who did not scold and sneer! You have talked of loving me and all that sort of thing, and then I have begun to be afraid. What am I—to be loved and cared for? A homeless dependant upon the bounty of my uncle, who hides himself—like the hermit that he is—away at gloomy Woodcroft."

She pointed fiercely over Llanberis, to a range of hills which stood out almost phantom-like against the pale-orange sky.

"I have heard of Sir John Carrington," Victor Linton said, "but I never connected you with him, Hilda."

"No," she answered witheringly—"because he is rich, and I am so wretchedly poor, with hardly a decent rag to my back! And that is the man who doles out a miserable pittance for my education and maintenance. Bread-and-margarine for breakfast and tea, and stringy meat and waxy potatoes for dinner! Ugh—it's horrible! And then to be reminded of it half a dozen times daily, and to be told that, if it wasn't for my kind-hearted, generous, and noble-souled uncle, I should be thrown upon the world to earn my own living! I went to the Castle once, and—and he had me turned away! I should like to kill him!"

She clenched her hands.

Victor Linton was becoming interested, and his warm heart was full of love and pity for the friendless girl.

"And is Sir John your only relative?" he asked.

"Oh, I've got a father somewhere out in India! He is a captain in Her Majesty's service; but he never troubles himself about such an awkward encumbrance as a daughter." Tears glistened on the girl's dark lashes, though the eyes beneath them gleamed resentfully. "I can remember him; he was called 'Handsome Carrington,' just as my uncle is known as 'Mad Carrington.' He broke my mother's heart. Then he married again; and my step-mother used to slap me. I think I scratched her face, though!" she added, with evident relish. "Well, I must go back to school; and I am sure to drop in for a lecture. Miss Morgan told me not to go out without permission, and I defied her, and she has written to Sir John."

Victor was silent for a little while, but his eyes never left the girl's rebellious face.

"Good-bye!" she said, suddenly holding out her hand. "The sun is setting. Look—you can see the towers of Woodcroft peeping over the trees!"

Victor took the little brown hand and held it within his own; then he drew the girl nearer to him.

"Hilda," he said tenderly and earnestly, "I am glad that you have told me so much about yourself."

"Are you?" She sighed.

"Yes—because it makes me more hopeful."

"And yet you pretend to like me! My misery pleases you!"

"I have told you that I don't like you, but that I love you—love you! And, now that I know that you are utterly friendless, I am not afraid to tell you, because I want to take you away from here." He bent nearer and whispered—"I want you to marry me, Hilda!"

She looked up at him almost bewildered.

"I—I am astounded, Mr. Linton. I should be of no use as a wife. I know nothing about housekeeping, and I should be ruinously extravagant. I can talk French and play the piano, but I detest figures! Still of course I am only eighteen, and I might learn heaps of things"—she looked wistfully in the direction of Woodcroft Castle—"and I think I could love any one intensely who was kind to me! I know that I should be faithful and true till death. But I hate in just the same way as I love."

"You must love me, Hilda—you must—you shall! I want you to marry me—I want you for my very own! I am not a rich man, but I have enough for a modest little home somewhere in London. I am a lawyer, junior partner in a firm of which my father is the head, and I write a little for the magazines."

"Do you really write stories, Mr. Linton?" Hilda asked with sudden interest.

"Yes." He positively blushed. "Can't you call me 'Victor'?"

"Why, yes! I think Victor a capital name for a man; and you look as though you might become a 'victor'—a hero!"

"If I were fighting for you, Hilda, I should know no fear."

"I believe you—you have such clear steadfast eyes! And I think that I am beginning to appreciate you!" She spoke very softly now, and her eyes became misty. He dared not trust himself to answer; his heart seemed to be leaping as though it would choke him. "Now, as regards your proposal, Victor, I want to be perfectly frank with you. Hitherto I had regarded you more in the light of a pleasant chum than anything else. You can't be very old."

She glanced at him quizzically.

"Twenty-four," he answered stoutly.

"And I am sure you did not think seriously of me for ever so long after we met at the Rectory six weeks ago."

"No—I did not," he confessed.

"You called me by slang names, and taught me to smoke cigarettes."

"Don't ever do it again, Hilda!" he pleaded earnestly. "I ought to have known better, but——"

"Yes—I know—I was such a Tartar! Now you will please tell me what has wrought this mysterious change in you, Mr. Linton! I have lost my chum."

"And have found a lover for life! Why have I learned to love you? Because you are so true-hearted, so original—and you have the loveliest eyes in all the world!"

Miss Carrington flushed now.

"Victor!" She glanced down at herself deprecatingly. "You will have to take me as I am; I have only my Sunday frock besides these faded things, and in money I possess just two shillings and ninepence-halfpenny. I counted it after dinner, and wondered if I could afford a new pair of gloves. My devoted father has forgotten my existence; I haven't had a letter from him for years, so there will be no help from that quarter. And, although my uncle is wifeless and childless——"

He kissed her suddenly on the lips, and was delighted to see the colour rush into her cheeks.

"That was taking a mean advantage!" Hilda said coldly.

"Don't be cross, dear—I never did it before!"

"And you must not do it again until this matter is settled between us."

"You talk as it it were a business contract, but I believe that the depths of your heart are stirred at last."

"And, although my uncle is wifeless and childless," she continued, "I have no claim upon him. Miss Morgan has told me that he is a very clever man, and has deserved well of his country. He was in the diplomatic service, or something of the kind, long before I was born. My father is many years younger than he, and, I suppose, received a younger son's portion and squandered it. I know that he has always been miserably poor. Then it was a mean thing to send me to Llanberis! We are not Welsh people at all, and Sir John only purchased Woodcroft Castle so that he could hide himself from the world which knew him.

Miss Morgan says that I am a thorn in his side, and that he hopes I shall soon be able to get my own living by teaching. When that happy time arrives, he will give me—what do you think? On condition that I go away from Llanberis—hundreds of miles away—he will give me fifty pounds to start a new life with!"

"Then you will not be quite a portionless bride, Hilda," her lover said carelessly, not dreaming of the wrath and contempt that were to follow.

"And do you think that I would touch my uncle's money upon such terms? Do you think that I shall know rest and contentment until the money which he has expanded upon me already is repaid to the uttermost farthing? He understands my feelings towards him. I have written to him——"

She paused, almost overcome by her passion.

"Written to him?" echoed Victor blankly.

"Yes—and demanded a statement of what I have cost him!"

"Great heavens," exclaimed her lover—"what a strange girl you are! Sir John must have felt bitterly hurt!"

Her breast rose and fell rapidly; her hands were tightly clenched; her face was white.

"How can he feel hurt? It is I who am the sufferer. Read that, and you will know what kind of man my hateful unnatural uncle is!"

She drew a well-worn letter from her pocket, and thrust it almost roughly into Victor's hands.

"The writing is blurred," the girl said—"blurred by angry hopeless tears. I have read it over and over again and seen no ray of hope—no possibility of getting out of this man's debt. How could my careless selfish father have allowed such indignities to be heaped upon me? I have been worse off than the commonest beggar who goes from door to door, for even he is independent. I have been sneered at by Miss Morgan, and suffered the covert insults of her wretched pupils!" Then she laughed hysterically. "But now the gates of freedom are opening before me."

Victor pressed one of her hands affectionately, and proceeded to read Sir John Carrington's letter.

"Miss Hilda Carrington," it began—"I approve of your sentiments, but hope that they are not as flimsy as your father's honour. The

amount I have been forced to expend upon you—or see my good name mixed up with some pauper question—is easily calculated. One hundred pounds per annum, in advance, has been paid to Miss Morgan for eight years. Unless you make some effort to earn your own living, a further sum of one hundred pounds will become due to that lady on the first day of January next. You are a young woman now, and, equipped with a good education, a good wardrobe, and the sum of fifty pounds, I should imagine that you ought to be able to relieve me of a very painful burden. However, the report concerning you from Miss Morgan is anything but reassuring, and I regard your burst of virtue for what it is worth—nothing!

"Yours, *et-cætera*, "JOHN CARRINGTON."

Victor turned the letter over two or three times with a deep frown on his brow.

"It is remarkable that a man of Sir John Carrington's character should write to a motherless girl in this way. He was famous twenty years ago for his administrative ability, and must have had the power of reading other men's minds—of accurately gauging character and motive."

"Does it follow that he is able to read a woman's mind?" she asked scornfully. "Besides, he is mad now—everybody says so!"

"Why do they say so?"—with a quick deprecatory movement.

"He lives like a hermit, he swears at his servants, and rides madly through the fields and woods on a fiery horse at midnight!"

"Not very conclusive!" Victor answered, returning the letter. "And you have written no reply to this?"

"Yes—yes!" Her dark eyes flashed again, and she stamped her right foot. "I have spurned his offer, and declared my intention of leaving Miss Morgan and Llanberis immediately; and I have promised to repay every shilling of the debt I have incurred, with compound interest, even if I have to work my fingers to the bone! I told him that I hated him, loathed him, and—and—lots of other things which I forget now."

"Poor little Hilda!"

"Don't call me 'poor little Hilda!' I can't bear it. Besides, I am, not little!" She shivered violently. "The sun has quite gone, Victor, and the wind is cold—like death!"

"Shall we go down the hillside to the valley? No—not that way. It will not be quite dark for another hour, and, since you have written that dreadful letter to Sir John, you need have no fear of Miss Morgan."

Hilda hesitated, and flushed resentfully.

"I have no fear of her; she is afraid of me. A hundred pounds a year for eight years, and she has not spent a fourth of the money upon me! As for my education, she has made me pay for that in all kinds of drudgery. I have been a governess and a servant rolled into one! I have received the kicks, but not the halfpence."

"Take my arm, Hilda; the hillside is steep."

She obeyed. It was so nice to have some one to lean upon!

CHAPTER II.

THE night promised to be lovely. There was not a cloud in the sky, and a full moon was rising, soon to shed her radiance over woodland, crag, and plain.

"We had better settle this business out of hand, Hilda," Victor Linton said abruptly, giving the girl's arm a fond pressure. "You are under the impression that you owe Sir John Carrington eight hundred pounds?"

"Eight hundred pounds," she repeated. "But it is not merely an impression, Victor."

"Perhaps not," he said doubtfully. "Well, I will not pretend that I have such a sum at command——"

"I would not accept it if you had," she interrupted quickly.

"Not as my wife?"

"I won't be your wife if you suggest such a thing! I met you to-day because you sent me that note, and I intended asking you if you could introduce me to some lady who wanted a companion—you seem to have so many friends! I had not the faintest idea of—of——"

"Of what?" he asked mischievously.

"Of our talking of love and marriage! We have been such good friends, and I liked and trusted you."

"And now you are learning to love me, Hilda?"

"Oh, Victor—I think I am!"

He felt that her hand trembled, and he saw tears glittering in her eyes.

"You liked and trusted me, and now I want your love as well as your trust. If I appear to be over-bold, over-confident, Hilda, you must remember that a man is useless in my profession unless he has unlimited cheek. When I found myself at Llanberis I was desperately annoyed, as I had arranged to join a friend at Bettws-y-coed. It was the result of getting into the wrong train."

"And what became of your friend?"

"Oh, he went off somewhere else in disgust! When I found myself here, I enjoyed the wild beautiful scenery for a week or two, struck up an acquaintance with the Rector—he knows some people whom I know in town—and there you are! Then I met you, and you amused me."

Hilda reddened.

"Spare me, Victor!" she whispered.

"I would not have you a little bit different for all the world! Your originality, your ingenuousness, your wicked temper—all appealed to me. You defied Miss Morgan because I said that you were afraid, and you smoked cigarettes because it horrified the good old Rector. You confided your little troubles to me, and bullied me, and made me love you—worship you—you naughty little witch! And now I want you to marry me."

"When?" the girl asked, quietly and softly.

"At once—next week or the week after! We can be married here, in the dear old church; Mr. Jarvis will be delighted to make us one."

"It is very sudden—awfully sudden!" Hilda whispered. "And won't Miss Morgan and the girls be astonished! I don't think I can give you an answer straight away; I wish that I had some one to advise me; I am only a child."

"Your own heart is your best guide, darling. Now I will tell you my plans," Victor went on quickly. "I am going back to Harlech School with you to-night, to explain to Miss Morgan how matters have been arranged between us. Oh, the lioness has no terrors for me! And, after all, I don't think that she is so very bad, Hilda."

"You don't know her as I do! She is always nice to gentlemen."

"I believe that she has made eyes at me!" Victor continued, with mock seriousness. "And she calls me 'dear Mr. Linton!' and insists on my sitting near her and on pouring out my tea at the Rectory."

"The wretch!" Hilda laughed outright, a sweet cheery laugh that echoed like gladsome music. Her big black eyes sparkled, and there was a touch of red in her thin cheeks.

Victor stopped and gazed into her face.

"This is more like your real self, darling—and some day you will be a beautiful woman. Oh, about our plans! We musn't wander from

the subject, and I think that we had better turn our steps homeward now; I haven't much more to tell you."

He paused and gazed up at the brightening moon. His heart was beating quickly. It was hard to realise that this girl would soon be his wife.

"I am listening," Hilda said, "and I can deny you nothing, Victor."

"Kiss me, then!" he said quickly. "Kiss me of your own free will!"

She turned and flung her arms about his neck, a fierce uncontrollable sob bursting from her lips.

"Victor, Victor, I can't help it! You have made me love you, and now I would die for you!"

He was amazed and delighted, and pressed her tightly to his heart.

"That settles everything, my darling! We will go straight to Miss Morgan and tell her the simple truth. Then I will interview the Rector, and run up to London to arrange one or two urgent matters—break the news to the governor and the *mater*, and so forth. They will be delighted to hear that my future wife is the niece of the famous Sir John Carrington, and the *mater* will love you. She is such a dear soul! As for the governor, he has often said that marriage is the only thing to cure me of my roving propensities and my love of literature. Then we will be married quietly, without ostentation, and have a delightful honeymoon"—his mind was busy with the subject of ways and means—"it does not matter where for the moment. And after that we can settle down to an ideal existence; you shall be my secretary, Hilda—my literary right hand, to type-write my stories, and attend to my correspondence, and that sort of thing."

"Oh, I shall be so happy, Victor!" cried Hilda delightedly. "And I will try to be good."

"And the money you earn in that way," he went on rather desperately, "will be your own; you must let me give you what I should pay a professional secretary if you did not act as one for me. You will be perfectly at liberty to use it as you please, and in a few years you will be able to cry quits with your uncle."

"May I write and tell him so?" The blood rushed to her face.

"That is just what you should do. But it will soon be 'Good night,' my love; here we are at the school-gates. To-morrow I shall come

to the school to see you—to-morrow, in the afternoon. We shall no longer be afraid of Miss Morgan."

"Afraid, Victor? No, indeed!" Then, exultantly, "How fortunate! Miss Morgan is alone in the front drawing-room—waiting, doubtless, to give me a lecture!"

She rang the bell, and the door was opened by the housemaid.

"La, Miss Carrington, how late you are!" the girl exclaimed, without noticing Hilda's companion. "She's in there," she whispered; "and I shouldn't wonder if you aren't in for a rumpus; answer her back, miss."

She shrank back in alarm at the sound of Victor Linton's voice. Hilda laughed contemptuously.

"Don't be frightened, Sarah—you have seen Mr. Linton before. He is my friend. You have always defended me, and I shall never forget you."

Sarah giggled hysterically, and omitted to knock at Miss Morgan's door before opening it—a serious breach of discipline. Then she presented a scarlet face to the amazed and dignified schoolmistress.

"Miss Carrington, ma'am, if you please," she said.

Hilda was close upon the girl's heels. Her head was held haughtily erect, her great black eyes gleamed, and she walked in confidently, conscious of her coming triumph.

The schoolmistress faced her. Angry words, of which she had an unlimited store, burst from her lips. Then she ceased with startling suddenness, and exclaimed—

"Oh, Mr. Linton!"

She stared at him for a second or two, then averted her face in confusion.

Victor placed his right arm protectingly around Hilda's waist, and she glanced up at him gratefully, although her lips quivered, and the colour forsook her cheeks.

"Oh, Mr. Linton"—Miss Morgan's face was still averted—"I am bitterly grieved that you should have witnessed this dreadful scene, but that bad, bad girl makes my life a misery! She leaves the school without permission—indeed, against my express commands—and wanders about the village at night, like the shameless hussy she is, with—with the village clod-hoppers——"

"How dare you? How dare you say such things of me?" Hilda advanced a step, her eyes flashing with scorn and contempt.

"You hear her now, Mr. Linton? She is utterly beyond my control, and her temper will be her ruin. It has been her ruin already, for Sir John Carrington has washed his hands of her."

She turned her head towards them, and a low cry escaped her lips, for Mr. Linton's arm was around the girl's waist; and Mr. Linton was championing her cause—she saw that from his flushed and angry face, from his indignant glance.

"Miss Morgan," he said in fierce tones, "hitherto I have always believed you to be a lady worthy of my respect! Unless I am a 'clod-hopper,' Miss Carrington is innocent of your malicious charge! As for her uncle, she is perfectly independent of him, and requires neither his friendship nor his charity. Within a few days—a couple of weeks at most—she will be my wife!"

The schoolmistress flung up her hands in a way indicative of rage and unbelief.

"Monstrous!" she exclaimed. "A child like that? How dare you deceive her? And who are you, Mr. Victor Linton? A stranger, an adventurer, with a wife somewhere else, no doubt! And she is Sir John Carrington's niece! But you won't get a penny from Sir John! He disowns her completely, because—because—— Oh, I cannot tell you why!"—which was strictly true. "As for you, you little traitress, you must have been carrying on for weeks with this young man! Go! My roof shall not shelter you for another hour!"

She pointed with a trembling finger to the door, her face convulsed with passion; but Victor Linton coolly interposed.

"Madam, you have been good enough to call me an adventurer, but, at any rate, I am a lawyer, and know how to protect Miss Carrington from your scurrilous tongue!" He turned fiercely upon her. "She remains here for at least another week, or you shall refund the money which her uncle has paid to you for her maintenance until next year! Moreover, she shall be properly treated, or I will make you prove, if you can, the aspersions you have cast upon her character and mine! Now, I trust, you fully understand that I am not to be trifled with. Hilda, are you satisfied?"

She looked bravely into his eyes;

"You know what is best, Victor. I am not afraid of Miss Morgan."

"Only one night shall you remain under this roof!" cried the schoolmistress. "I warn you both! She has threatened to kill me—I will swear to it!"

With a scathing glance at the lovers, she darted from the room, and they heard her strident voice giving orders to the servants.

Victor took Hilda into his strong arms and kissed her swiftly and passionately.

"See what trouble I have brought upon you," he said—"and all through my precipitate love-making! I suppose that you must leave here to-morrow—I hate your staying even for one night—but it will not be difficult to find lodgings for you in the village until we can start anew together. You will be ready in the morning—say, at eleven o'clock, darling?"

"Yes." She merely breathed the word, but there was a world of meaning in it, and her eyes were filled with tears.

"Hilda—Hilda, what is the matter?"

"Can't you guess, Victor? Can't you see that I am beginning to realise the true meaning of love? But for you I should not have a friend in all the world, and I meant to start life alone, if I had to beg my bread. The girls and the teachers here all dislike me, and I hate them—I hate them! The only creature who has ever spoken a kind word to me is the housemaid." She sobbed, with her head on his shoulder. "What a little fool I am!"

"My poor darling! Ah, it will be a busy day to-morrow! You want some new things, sweetheart. I will have a talk with the Rector this very night," he went on ramblingly; "and we will go shopping to-morrow—you and I. Of course the murder will be out very quickly, but you won't care?"

"I? No," she answered scornfully; "I shall be glad, because it will wound Miss Morgan and everybody else."

"Don't be vindictive!" he laughed. "You don't look a bit pretty when your teeth are gleaming and your eyes flash in that way."

"I don't care—only for you—Victor!" Then she added remorsefully, "I will try to be good."

"And, when we have had a happy day together, darling, and you are comfortably housed until our marriage-bells ring out, I will run up to

town by the last train and see the governor. He has old-fashioned notions about professional men steadying down early in life, so that he ought to be delighted. Then I must get a nice little home ready for you, even if I have to take a furnished place just at first. You won't mind that, will you? In America—and other places—young married people prefer not to be burdened with the cares of housekeeping; it gives them so much more time to spend together, you know."

Hilda did not follow his reasoning altogether. She was satisfied that some one loved her—that some one was ready to make any sacrifice for her, and that that "some one" was the man before her, whom she was gradually and surely idealising into a hero. A home of some kind would be necessary; it did not matter where that home might be so that she could work—work, and become independent. She told him this, and he laughed constrainedly. He had a vision of his father's grim face—keen-eyed and heavy-browed. The prospects of the firm were not too flourishing, and he had been offered a partnership on condition that he dropped his "scribbling notions," and settled down to the law, and the law only.

"To-morrow morning, at eleven, Hilda," he said abruptly, "have everything ready, as I shall be here with a fly to take your luggage to the new diggings. The Rector will recommend a place, I am sure."

He embraced her passionately, and was rewarded with a look that he remembered for all time.

CHAPTER III.

FROM Miss Morgan's house Victor Linton went to the Rectory. It was rather late in the evening to trouble the old clergyman, but Victor felt sure of his help and sympathy.

As he approached the house he was relieved to see a light burning in the study, and as he rang the bell his heart was beating wildly. The servant who answered his summons ushered him into a reception-room, whence he was called by the Rector into the "den" which saw the making of his Sunday sermons.

The Reverend Andrew Jarvis was a clergyman of the old school, generous and sympathetic, with more heart perhaps than intellect. He was a man well advanced in years, but burdened with the cares of a growing family, which had to be fed, clothed, and educated upon a mere pittance. He had married late in life a pretty, pink-cheeked, frivolous girl, who had degenerated into a washed-out querulous woman, and daily made complaint that she might have done better had she married a former lover, who was a linen-draper.

"Sit down, Mr. Linton—sit down!" said the Rector cheerily, closing the study door. "Have you dropped in for a chat and a smoke? Mrs. Jarvis and the children have gone to bed. I have to do most of my writing at night," he added regretfully.

Victor took out his cigar-case, and held it towards the Rector.

"Yes—I do want a chat and a smoke, Mr. Jarvis. I hope I am not checking the divine afflatus!"

Mr. Jarvis smiled feebly.

"No—I am not in form to-night. Two of the children are suffering from the whooping-cough, and the noise racks my nerves. I am afraid I shall have to depend on an old friend for next Sunday morning."

He broke off with a weary sigh, and began to puff at the cigar.

For a few minutes there was silence, and the fragrant tobacco-smoke ascended in spiral rings.

"I've come to say 'Good-bye' for a week or so, Mr. Jarvis," Victor said at last. "And I want you to do something for me."

His manner was rather confused, but his clear eyes never left the clergyman's face.

"If I can serve you in any way, my dear sir, you have only to command me. And you will remember me to your father? It is quite possible that I have drifted completely out of his mind; we were never very great chums, and our school-days were so long ago! I don't think that I should have ever thought of him again if you had not chanced upon Llanberis. A hard-headed practical fellow he was—'bound to get on,' we used to say."

Victor shivered.

"How chilly the evenings are growing! And yet the day has been as hot as midsummer." He took a long pull at his cigar. "I will not forget to mention you to the governor; indeed I have already done so in my letters. Now I will plunge right into my business, and I want you to lend me a sympathetic ear."

"Certainly, my boy—certainly!" Mr. Jarvis murmured.

But instead of plunging into the business the young man was silent again for several minutes.

"Well," he continued at last, "it's about Miss Carrington."

The Rector became interested.

"I am genuinely sorry for that young lady," he said. "She is a perfect child of misfortune, who needs taking in hand by some one who can control her. It is a crying shame that Sir John will not do something more for her; but he is evidently a hard unfeeling man. The girl has grown up—just grown up, that's all, like a rank weed. I once approached Sir John—it was my duty to do so—and he has since refused to see me, and has withdrawn his support from the church. Not that I ever saw him inside it, but the servants attended, and Sir John used to contribute liberally. As for the niece, I don't know what is to become of her—a wayward untamable creature——"

"Mr. Jarvis!" interrupted Victor hotly. The blood was racing through his veins.

The Rector dropped the stump of his cigar.

"Sh—h! Don't speak so loudly! The children—Mrs. Jarvis," he added explanatorily.

"Mr. Jarvis," said Victor abruptly, "the wayward untamable creature is to become my wife immediately. I love her with all my heart! I am here to-night to make arrangements with you about the wedding, and one or two other things. Miss Carrington leaves Harlech School to-morrow morning, but I have no place to take her to until I am ready to marry her—you understand? And I must run up to town and interview the *pater*." A lump rose in his throat. "I want to be married by you in your church, either by license or in the ordinary way. In the meantime Miss Carrington needs quiet respectable lodgings, as we have both quarrelled violently with Miss Morgan."

The Rector took another cigar, and put the wrong end between his lips.

"Bless my heart," he murmured—"what a terrible misfortune!" He glanced at Victor's angry face. "Poor lad!" he added.

The young man was stung to the quick, but he cooled at once.

"Mr. Jarvis," he said quietly, "I shall be obliged if you will make no comments! If I am a young man, I have been well schooled in the ways of the world."

"So I believed of myself when I was four-and-twenty. Well, it is no business of mine! I was only thinking of your father and how I should take it if I were he. Why not wait another year or two?"

"A year or two?" laughed Victor good-humouredly. "Why not suggest eternity?"

"I thought just the same once. Well, well, you know your own business best—if you will you will!"

"You are right there, sir. I love Miss Carrington with all her imperfections, and I think that she loves me. She is a gem amongst women in these days of artificiality; every glance, every word, every gesture speaks truth—truth—truth!"

"Yes," assented the Rector. "I like the girl, though I believe that she has set me at defiance more than once." He sighed, and then his heart warmed. "I suppose that it is Heaven's will, and I wish you both every happiness! Now as to these nice quiet lodgings for a few weeks! Let me see. H'm—there is Miss Lewis, who keeps a fancy shop in Llanberis. I can thoroughly recommend her and her rooms."

"I know the shop," interrupted Victor.

"Then take Miss Carrington there, and say that I sent you. As for the wedding, you must make your own arrangements; you know, I am sure, that it will give me pleasure to tie the knot. And after?"

Victor bit his lip and frowned.

"That depends upon your father?"

"You are right. I am to have a partnership upon certain conditions. If the governor cuts up rough, I shall drop the law altogether; there are a good many thousand barristers and lawyers in London already, and I have no great liking for the profession."

"And in that event?" the Rector asked mildly.

"I shall turn my attention to literature." He blushed like a school-girl. "I have already done a little writing, and have met with some success, and the field is wide. I am not absolutely penniless; I have a couple of hundred pounds to start life with."

"I wish you joy, my lad—every conceivable joy and success! But there are so many disappointments, so many pitfalls! I have tried literature myself, and the cost of postage-stamps to and from publishers was ruinous! You will think that I am a sort of Job's comforter, but I have seen life."

He glanced apprehensively at the ceiling.

"I hope that Mrs. Jarvis does not smell the tobacco-smoke!" he murmured.

"You are a dear old hen-pecked simpleton!" thought Victor, and then he rose to his feet.

"I won't worry you any more to-night, sir; but I will trot in and say 'Good-bye' to-morrow. My heart is light enough, and I am not afraid of the future! I shall of course be sorry to have a split with the governor, but he can't expect to have everything all his own way. I shall take Miss Carrington to her new lodgings to-morrow, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your sympathy and advice!"

There was an ominous bumping on the floor of the room above, and the Rector nervously held out his hand.

"It's Mrs. Jarvis and a chair," he explained naively; "she calls me in that way when anything is wrong with the—er—children. Good night, my dear Linton—good night!"

Victor felt in no mood for sleep. With his hands thrust deep into his pockets, he walked slowly along the lane that led from the Rectory

to Harlech School. He must have one more glimpse of Hilda's window! Yes—a light was burning in her room.

"My darling!" he muttered. "Heavens—how I hate and despise the people here!"

He went to his apartments, and passed a restless night, his dreams being all of Hilda, and woke with the lark. From his open window he listened to the birds' rapturous songs.

"Beautiful Wales," he thought—"if only my home were here! How sordid and sunless Chancery Lane will seem after this—how monotonous the eternal grind! I shudder at the prospect!"

It seemed an age before the breakfast-bell rang. The young fellow swallowed his coffee hastily, and soon was striding in the direction of Miss Lewis's little shop. Miss Lewis listened in amazement to the tale he had to tell. So Hilda Carrington had found a lover—that shabby, unattractive, penniless schoolgirl—and the lover was a gentleman! How lucky some women were, and how blind some men!

Oh, yes—she would be only too happy to oblige Mr. Linton, and the Rector!

"And you might assist Miss Carrington in the choice of suitable clothes," Victor hazarded; "she thinks of buying a few things. If you will——"

"Indeed, no!" answered Miss Lewis quickly. "Miss Carrington has the reputation of having a will of her own. I should not care to interfere, Mr. Linton, but I will make her as comfortable as I can."

Victor bowed his thanks.

Promptly at eleven o'clock he was at Harlech School with a carriage. Hilda was waiting for him outside, her one little box on the doorstep.

"That contains the whole of my belongings," she said; "I have been here since ten o'clock; we had a bother, Miss Morgan and I." Her eyes grew sullen and dark.

Victor took the forlorn-looking figure in his arms, in full view of the astonished driver, and kissed her tenderly.

"It is all right now, darling; I have settled everything."

In an instant her face lighted up, and she half sobbed—

"Oh, Victor, Victor, how can I ever, ever repay you?"

There was no mistaking her earnestness, and her lover's heart thrilled

through and through. For such bliss as this the whole world were well lost!

The drive to Miss Lewis's occupied only a few minutes, and, after Hilda had been shown her new home, the lovers were left alone for a little while.

"I have altered my plans slightly," Victor said, "and will leave you to do your shopping alone, darling. If I start for London by the mid-day train I can see my father to-night, and that may save us a lot of waiting. Then I have to get some cash, and make arrangements for our wedding and our honeymoon. Unfortunately, there is a very practical side even to a honeymoon! Now, buy just what you like, and if you are pleased I shall be pleased too."

He thrust two Bank of England notes for ten pounds each into her rather unwilling hand.

"How kind of you—how kind of you, Victor! But I will repay this money. You will have lots of work for me to do, dear?"

"Yes," he said; "but we don't want to talk of that for a little while. I am not in a working mood—I am too happy. I will write you a long letter to-morrow, and let you know when I am likely to return. Oh, my darling, for your sweet sake I would give up the whole world!"

"I believe you would," she answered simply and gravely. "And some day I will prove to you how a poor despised girl like myself can love!"

CHAPTER IV.

It was nearly nine o'clock when the express ran into Euston. Never had the great railway-station presented a drearier aspect—at least, that was Victor Linton's impression. The early autumn evening was dark, and a cold wind swept over the platform, the lamps glimmered through a yellowish-blue haze, and the sharp air made his nostrils tingle and his throat husky.

"I shall never like London again," he thought; "life here would simply be unbearable! It is a delightful place to visit occasionally, but to be doomed to work in it and to live in it day in day out——"

"Cab, sir? Hansom?"

A porter barred his way, wistfully eyeing the bag in his hand.

"Any luggage, sir?"

"No!" was the curt answer. His luggage was at Llanberis; he had no use for it in London yet a while.

The porter hurried to the next compartment, disgusted with himself and with Victor Linton. The young lawyer had been familiar to him for several years, and this was the very first time the man had seen him arrive home without plenty of luggage and without giving him a handsome "tip." He felt as if he had been defrauded of some right.

Victor left the station and turned into Euston Square, where the Lintons had lived for generations. The house in which they dwelt was a weather-beaten, gloomy-looking old building.

Victor rang the bell, and as soon as the door was opened he caught sight of his sister, a bright-faced happy girl, with features closely resembling his own.

"Hallo, Marian!" He dropped his bag and kissed her on the cheek.

"Why, you are quite sunburnt, Victor, and you look ever so much stouter! Have you walked from the station? The dad got your telegram all right, and supper is waiting."

"Be quiet, chatterbox!" he said, hanging up his hat. "Where is dad—and the *mater?*"

The question was answered by his mother, who met him in the doorway of the dining-room.

"Welcome home, my dear boy! You can't think how dull the house is without you!" The young man winced slightly as he kissed her. "Your father has been obliged to go back to the office to finish some important business—a case that is down for trial to-morrow, and about which he appeared to be very anxious. He has not been well lately, Victor; perhaps he may be able to have a spell of rest now that you have come home."

"Yes—certainly!" Victor answered. His mother's questioning anxious gaze disconcerted him, and his conscience reproached him bitterly. "I'll talk matters over with him as soon as he comes home."

"He won't be back until very late, I'm afraid—counsel and he have to settle some troublesome point—so you had better wait until the morning, I think. Come, sit down—you must be hungry and tired!"

Marian rang the bell, and supper was soon served in the cosy curtained room. Victor endeavoured to be cheerful, and to talk of his holiday.

"Oh, yes—I have done Snowdon, and have even been favoured by the Spectre! I stood on the edge of a little cairn, and saw an exact image of myself thrown upon the clouds—just like the Brocken, you know."

"And what did you find to do in one place for so long, Victor?" asked Marian. "I think that I should have been constantly moving about. Now, confess—you have been story-writing?"

Victor looked guilty, and his face reddened.

"I could wish for no more congenial occupation, little sister!".

There was silence for a few minutes, and then Marian remembered that a letter had arrived for him that very morning. He was not interested until she told him that the envelope bore the name of a publishing house which had accepted "a few things" from him.

Again the guilty flush mantled his cheeks and brow, and Marian tantalisingly held the letter beyond his reach.

"Guess the awful news! Your story is unsuitable, and you failed to enclose stamps for its return, or is there a cheque between the mystic folds of this paper?"

If Marian only knew his doubt and perplexity! What was his duty? For a long time he had suspected that the practice of Linton, Son, & Linton was not so profitable as the firm desired. It had been "Linton,

Son, & Linton" for several generations, and up to ten or fifteen years earlier it had continued to reap a golden harvest; but just about that time several of its wealthy clients had died, and the practice had fallen off generally in the face of constantly increasing competition. Victor had never taken kindly to the profession—he detested it thoroughly—but he had obeyed the iron will of his father.

"Take your letter, Vic; and forgive me for worrying you!" Marian said mischievously.

"You are a dear girl!" The mother was looking on smilingly. "Yes—by George, it is a cheque! Five guineas for the little story I sent in, and an invitation to attempt a novel. And the publishers wish to see me"—he pulled at his moustache, and his eyes lighted up—"the die is cast!"

His mother and sister looked grave; both knew of the deep-rooted prejudice entertained by the head of the house against anything which threatened to divert Victor's attention from the office.

"The die is cast?" repeated Mrs. Linton questioningly.

Victor started, and looked up.

"Yes, mother; I shall never be happy or even content unless I follow a profession congenial to my tastes. I have never liked the confinement and the grind of a lawyer's office, to speak of nothing worse; but I have laboured to please my father, and he, to do him justice, has been very blind to many of my—eccentricities."

"You will say nothing at present?" she pleaded.

"What? Ah, mother, you know that I can't sail under false colours! I must speak at once, and have done with what will be an unpleasant matter—for perhaps half an hour! I don't think that the governor will be unreasonable, and he cannot pretend to be taken by surprise. There are dozens of cleverer fellows than I am ready to purchase a half-share in his practice."

He read the letter again, and, meeting his sister's sympathetic glance, smiled hopefully.

"You see," he continued, "as an author, I shall be a sort of free-lance—the whole world my tilting-field. I can live in any part of the world which at the moment most appeals to my fancy; and I think that there must be Bohemian blood in my veins."

He thought of Hilda, and his eyes turned to the letter which lay outspread on the table.

"You will take time to think it over?" Mrs. Linton suggested.

"I have already weighed matters, mother—weighed them judicially from my point of view. I have never had a secret from you, and I have travelled from Wales to-day to tell you of the change that has come into my life." His eyes glowed with earnestness, and a dark flush had settled in either cheek. "I did not come home with the intention of taking up my work at the office—indeed, my luggage is left behind—I wanted to have a long talk with my father about the future, and to tell you all that I am going to be married!"

Had the moon fallen at her feet, Mrs. Linton could hardly have been more amazed.

"Victor, my boy!"

"Mother, he is only telling us a wicked story!" cried Marian.

"It is quite true," Victor said quietly. "Why shouldn't it be? You are two years younger than I, Miss Marian, and yet you are engaged!"

His sister blushed.

"Oh, but Harry and I have been engaged since we were children! With you it is so different! There has never been any one——"

"There certainly is some one now, and she will be my wife within a week or two! I don't see anything extraordinary in it," he added irritably; "I am twenty-four years of age; and I must settle down sooner or later."

"But, my dear, it is so sudden!"

"I don't think so."

Mrs. Linton shed a few tears, and Marian asked a hundred questions.

"'What is her name—what is she like?'" said Victor, with all the fervour of a happy lover. "Her name is Hilda Carrington, and, without being strictly pretty, she has completely bewitched me! She hasn't a friend in all the world; and that is why I resolved upon an immediate marriage—so that I could take care of her. She is younger than Marian, and she knows next to nothing of real life."

"Why can't you bring the young lady to London, and be married here?" Mrs. Linton asked plaintively. "Whatever will people say? The Mayhews are such sticklers as regards matters of personal honour!"

"Oh, hang the Mayhews! And I hope that nobody will question my honour!" Victor said angrily.

"But we must consider your sister's prospects," Mrs. Linton pleaded tearfully.

"If Harry Mayhew is under the heel of his people, and hasn't grit enough to please himself, I am vastly mistaken in him!" retorted Victor.

Marian kissed him on the cheek, but Mrs. Linton sighed.

"It will be all right, mother," Victor went on tenderly and confidently. "I shall tell the governor everything in the morning; and I hope that he will take it kindly, because nothing that he can say or do will influence me one iota now. Of course I shall feel very much grieved if we part in anger; but the world is before me, and, as I am making my own bed, I sha'n't grumble if it prove a thorny one! I will be equally plain with you about Hilda Carrington; I can't bring her here, because she hasn't a decent change of clothing; and she has her feelings like other girls. She is the daughter of a Captain Carrington who does not care two pins what becomes of her, and the niece of Sir John Carrington, who is as little devoted to her. A lady? Of course, she is a lady by birth, but she is poorer than the proverbial church-mouse! As proud as Lucifer too! Now you understand her position, and, as soon as I have pulled myself together a bit, we will come and see you—or you shall come and see us." He stared gloomily at the fire. "I think I shall look up Harry Mayhew to-morrow, and tell him what's in the wind."

"Yes, do!" Marian said quickly. "And invite him to the wedding as best man—you will want somebody!"

"I will, by Jove!"

"Then he will be able to tell me all about it, and about Hilda! I wish that I might go too!"

"That is impossible, Mab."

And, having kissed his mother and sister, he retired to his room.

CHAPTER V.

"SAY nothing to the governor," were Victor's last words to his mother; and Mrs. Linton had no desire to rouse the storm which she foresaw, for she was naturally a timid woman, and very much afraid of her iron-willed husband. But she said too little and looked too much and the old lawyer scented trouble of some kind.

At an early hour the next morning he knocked at Victor's door.

"When you are ready, I wish to see you in the study," he said.

"I will be with you in ten minutes, father."

The old man made no reply, but tramped down-stairs, his brow stern, and his lips set more firmly together even than usual. He entered the study, and waited, drumming on the table the while. The feeble sunshine stole in at the window, and lighted up the grizzled head, revealing the lines on his face, and making him look older than his years.

Victor saw all this, and his heart smote him.

"Good morning, dad!" he said cheerfully, but there was a tremor in his voice. "Mother says that you have not been so well as usual."

Mr. Linton pointed to a chair.

"Sit there, Victor," he said brusquely; "and for the present we had better dispense with any question concerning my health. If there is anything wrong with me, it is worry, mental worry!"

"I am sorry——"

"Sorry? You are the chief cause of it!"

"I?" Victor's face was very pale, but he looked his father resolutely in the eyes. "What has my mother told you?"

"Nothing! But do you think that I am so poor a physiognomist that I cannot tell when mischief is in the wind? To be plain, there has already been too much philandering upon your part, and we must have an understanding, once and for all, here and now!" He struck the table with the palm of his hand. "Your holiday has been unnecessarily prolonged. You were out of sorts, I admit, but the recuperative powers of a strong and healthy young man would be

very poor indeed to take all these weeks to clear the dust and cobwebs of London from his brain!"—with a contemptuous sneer. "But I have given way to you, pandered to your laziness—that is the correct word, I am beginning to believe—and am determined now that I will end it. Wait a moment—hear me out, and then I will listen to what you have to say! Let me impress upon your mind, Victor, that the old firm of Linton, Son, & Linton is going to the dogs for lack of proper attention on the part of the principals. I am not able to stand the polluted air of the courts as I did ten years ago; and, though Simpson is very well in his way, he is only a clerk after all—we are losing the confidence of our clients. I want to give you your due, Victor, and let no man say that I am unjust! You are clever, brilliantly clever, but your work is done spasmodically. A steady plodder with half your brains will cut the ground from under your feet unless you awake to the fact that life isn't a bed of roses! And where am I to look for the cause? To this mania of yours for scribbling a lot of senseless stuff which none but schoolgirls would waste their time in reading!"

There was a brief silence; then Victor, looking up, said quietly—

"Father, have you forgotten that I am a man, and have some right to consider my own future?"

"I speak for your own good!" was the angry rejoinder.

"That is your honest belief, I am sure, but it is not mine."

"You know the consequences?" the old lawyer shouted back. "Would to Heaven I had another son! What are your intentions for the future?"

"Unless I can be of some temporary assistance to you, father, I have no desire ever to touch a brief again. Often enough in the past you have hinted at taking a partner; why not do so? If mother has told you nothing, then it is my duty to inform you that I am to be married in a couple of weeks or so, and that I intend living by my pen. I hate the profession and the daily routine of the office—have always hated it!"

"You are going to be married? You? Good heavens, you are a greater fool than I thought you were! And you will live by your pen? Starve, you mean, in an attic! You will ruin the whole family—your mother, sister—all!"

He pointed to the door.

"My future wife is Miss Hilda Carrington," continued Victor calmly. "Her father is Captain Carrington; and she is the niece of Sir John Carrington, of Woodcroft Castle."

"Leave me!" Mr. Linton cried. "I wish never to look upon your face again! I would that the name of Linton could die with me!"

Victor rose and stood irresolute for a few seconds.

"At least don't let us part like this, father!" he said hoarsely. "Surely my actions are not of so much importance——"

"Leave me!" the lawyer repeated, without looking up. "And, mark my words, you are going to misery, starvation, and worse than death! Go—and take my condemnation with you!"

Victor was bewildered. He repressed the angry words that rose to his lips; and he never quite remembered the actual words that were uttered, but he was overcome by remorse, indignation, and sorrow.

When he was alone in his room again he endeavoured to review the scene, and was half inclined to believe that it was a hideous dream, until he heard the front-door crash, and saw that his father had left the house.

The breakfast-hour arrived, and Victor went down-stairs. Both his mother and his sister were waiting for him, and their faces showed that they had divined something of what had passed between him and his father.

"The governor cut up pretty rough," he said briefly, "and appeared to be amazed that I should kick over the traces! I have no business with any individuality—I ought to accept my fate at his hands, and be thankful for small mercies! His wild talk was a bit mystifying."

"He is bitterly disappointed, Victor! You must bear with him," Mrs. Linton murmured.

"It is all over, mother."

"I don't understand you, dear." She placed two trembling hands upon his shoulders.

"I mean that it is 'Good-bye!' The governor has told me to clear out; but of course I sha'n't be far away from you. And I shall get on all right; I still have the money left to me by poor aunt Mary, you know—it is only a few hundreds, but many happy couples have begun with less."

He sat down at the breakfast-table. Far up the street he heard the

sharp "rat-tat" of the postman, and his heart bounded. Was there a letter for him from Hilda? She had promised to write to him, and even a single line would be sweet among all these bitters.

The postman came nearer, nearer. He stopped at the door of the Lintons' house; then a servant appeared with a letter. Victor's heart seemed to stand still as Marian turned the letter over abstractedly, saying—

"It is for you, Victor."

His face flushed, his fingers trembled. It was from Hilda—he knew her schoolgirl hand so well!—and it was quite a bulky package. He tore open the envelope, and two enclosures dropped out. He saw himself addressed as "Darling Victor"; then—

"I promised to write to you, and I always endeavour to keep promises. Miss Lewis has kindly instructed me in the mysteries of shopping this afternoon, and you will hardly recognise the shabby schoolgirl when you come back to her next week. Next week! It seems like an eternity, and I am already very lonely here, because I am such an object of curiosity. People are not yet satisfied as to the enormity of my sins. I have no doubt that Miss Morgan is industriously putting about some fibs.

"I have just been looking at myself in the glass, and cannot imagine what you can see in my gipsy face to admire. I don't think I should have thought of it if I had not heard some one remark that my impish ways must have bewitched you! But it does not matter, as I am sure of the eternal love of one who is sacrificing so much for me. Dear, dear Victor—my hero—I could die for you! I have enclosed a copy of a letter which I shall post to my uncle, Sir John Carrington, to-night. I know that Miss Morgan will have something to say, and it is delightful to make my independence known to him. Come back to me soon—my own! "Yours in life and death, "HILDA."

The letter to Sir John was in a very different strain. All through it were notes of defiance and triumph.

"You have treated me abominably"—it ran—"and subjected me to the petty spite of a narrow-minded vixenish woman, who has tortured me daily with her tongue. Why did you not send me back to my father when I was a child, or to some pauper institution? It would

have been much cheaper for you, and would have lessened the burden of the debt I owe you. However, I do not require your bounty now, and gladly renounce the name of Carrington for ever. In a short time I shall be married to a man who regards your 'generosity' to the girl he loves with horror and repugnance—so much so that he has promised to assist her to refund every penny, with the usual legal interest."

Victor put the letters into his pocket, smiling as he did so.

"I shall not be absent from you for a week, my darling," he thought—"perhaps not for another day."

His mother was watching him with mournful interest.

"It is all for the best," he said again, this time speaking more cheerfully. "The rupture was bound to come sooner or later. I will give Harry Mayhew a call to-day, then see the publishers, and to-night I shall go back to Llanberis. Yes, Mab, the letter was from Hilda—the girl I am going to marry. Perhaps you will meet me somewhere? I don't care to see the governor here again just yet; I will telegraph a place of meeting when my business is done."

He started citywards a little later, and had an interview with the publishers who had been pleased to encourage him. The result was a gratifying one.

From the office of the publishers he walked to the Mayhews' house in Regent's Park. They were people of good position, and Linton, Son, & Linton had been their solicitors for many years. Lady Florence Mayhew was the only child of a peer, and her husband was a colonel in the Guards; their only child, Harry, was a good-natured, handsome fellow, and was deeply attached to Marian Linton.

The butler greeted Victor with respectful cordiality; he had known him since he began to wear an Eton suit.

"Morning, Baily!" said Victor. "Don't announce me at this unearthly hour. Is Mr. Harry knocking about anywhere? He is at home? Then take me to his den, and tell him that I want to see him."

The "den" was a smoking-room on the second floor—a veritable bachelor's sanctum. A pyramid of cigar-boxes stood on a side-table, and pipes of all sorts and sizes were scattered everywhere. The walls were decorated with sporting prints, and photographs of sporting celebrities and pretty women. The whole of the furniture was crowded

into one corner of the room, and a set of boxing-gloves showed that there had been some "fun" very recently.

Victor had only just mastered these details when the door was pushed open and a handsome young giant entered the room. His right hand was held out, and his merry brown eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"Glad to see you, old man! Thought that you were seedy and 'run down,' but you're looking fit. When did you get back to town? Last night? Marian knew nothing of your coming yesterday; we had a last walk through the park. The Colonel's determined to go abroad at once—can't stand our villainous climate in the winter!" He swung round a couple of chairs with a disconsolate growl. "Rheumatism is his excuse, but I believe that trouble is brewing for me and Marian. Sit down, Vic, and don't look so much like a blessed fool! Don't take any notice of the room—I've been having a dust up with the gloves with our new groom."

Linton sat down, feeling the reverse of cheerful.

"Trouble for you and my sister, Hal? What trouble?"

"Look at the dear innocent!" But Harry Mayhew's face wore a serious expression. "Is it possible that you have not seen your governor yet? I fancied that he had hurried you back to business. Money-matters are the trouble, of course. I hate money! The Colonel and your guv got down to the question of settlements recently; you know that I have only a couple of hundred a year." He stammered and blushed.

"Settlements?" said Victor.

"Hang it, I see that you know nothing about the matter! Well, I broached the question of an early marriage, and the Colonel interviewed your guv. In the end there was a row, and I believe that the Colonel has sent your firm the name of some new people who are to conduct his affairs in future. I don't quite know the ins and outs of it all, but I have been ordered to break off the engagement. Marian doesn't know a word of it yet—bless her heart!—and never shall if I can help it."

Victor rose and paced the floor.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Shake the dust of this hole off my feet and start on my own account, if Marian does not say me nay! I am sorry, for the mother's

sake; but when the Colonel speaks she is the merest nonentity. Here I am at five-and-twenty without any profession! I suppose I must go in for company-promoting or mine-selling—that is the usual fate of men who have been brought up to live upon expectations—unless, by Jove, I turn to professional cricketing or boxing!"

He thrust his hands into a pair of boxing-gloves and hammered the wall unmercifully.

"Don't be an ass!" Victor said. "I believe if you were at the point of death you would make a joke of it!"

"I'm not joking—great Scot! Of what use is two hundred a-year for a couple like Marian and me to live upon? Oh, yes, I am quite decided, unless your people put a spoke in my wheel!"

"What an infernal muddle!" growled Victor abstractedly. "I can see fighting and discord all along the line. Hal, I know that you are grit through and through, and we must stand side by side. I am sorry that the Colonel and my father have quarrelled, but that is no affair of mine; I am no longer a member of the firm of Linton, Son, & Linton."

"What a remarkable coincidence! Two homeless waifs on the world's wayside! But go on with your story—sorry I considered mine to be of greater importance! I am as serious as a judge now."

And Victor Linton told his friend everything.

"So you want me to be best man? And the wedding will take place in double-quick time? I gave you credit for a cooler head, old man; but I am delighted nevertheless if you are satisfied. I am yours to command at any moment; and look here"—he stopped short and regarded Linton steadily—"I am going to take a leaf out of your book, and ask Marian to become my wife at once! I don't think that your people will object; but, if they do"—he nodded significantly—"it will happen all the same with you at my back! I've got a couple of hundred a year and friends who have power to help me into a little wholesome employment. A villa in the suburbs at forty pounds a year, with a tiny garden back and front, a conservatory six feet square, a couple of gold-fish and a canary—why, it will be paradise, with Marian beside me!"

Victor rose from his chair again.

"I am going back to Llanberis," he said. "I must not miss my train, but I will write to you fully to-morrow. No, I shall not see

my father again for a little while; we have already had a painful interview, and I could not bear a repetition of it. No doubt he is terribly disappointed, but I cannot let my life's happiness slip away from me to humour a whim."

They shook hands.

"I shall look for your letter the day after to-morrow, and you had better send it under cover to Marian; within twenty-four hours I expect to be homeless. This very day a few words will be exchanged between the Colonel and myself, and you know what the Colonel is!" He made a running kick at an imaginary object, adding melodramatically, "That will be my fate! Then I shall go to Euston Square and see what your people have to say to me. Good-bye, old man—the best of luck!"

Victor nodded brightly, encouragingly, and left his friend. As he was going out of the house he encountered Colonel Mayhew, and half paused, wondering if he should greet him in the old way or not. But, with a cold bow and a colder stare, the Colonel entered the house without a word.

The hot blood rushed to Victor Linton's face, for hitherto he and Colonel Mayhew had been upon terms of the friendliest intimacy; indeed, the interests of the two families had been almost identical for years. The Colonel's investments had always been made on the advice of Mr. Linton, the two generally discussing these matters over the after-dinner port and cigars; the Colonel and his aristocratic wife had been graciously pleased to welcome Marian Linton as the future wife of their only son. And now it was all over!

"Let the old men fight it out," Victor thought resentfully, "while the young ones consider their own happiness!"

He found his mother and sister waiting to see him off at Euston Station. Mrs. Linton gazed at him wistfully, and Marian's laughing face was all smiles and blushes.

"You are not up to time, naughty boy!" his sister said. Then the faintest trace of anxiety crept into her voice. "You have good news?"

"Good and—indifferent," he answered gravely. "I have made such terms as regards my own future that the last lingering doubt is gone. I shall never regret the step I have taken—it is like casting aside a yoke

of slavery. And when my father is reconciled to the change I shall be the happiest of men."

"I am so glad!" Mrs. Linton confessed. "And I have nothing to reproach you with, my son."

Victor regarded her in some surprise. He never remembered to have heard his mother express a decided opinion in opposition to the wishes of her husband.

"You have told us the good news," Marian broke in. "Now for the indifferent, which means—bad!" The colour had forsaken her face, and there was an anxious look in her eyes. "Harry was not himself yesterday," she added in a whisper, "and I know that something is wrong!"

Victor glanced up at the station clock. The platform was rapidly becoming crowded.

"Twelve minutes," he said. "I will secure my ticket and seat; wait here for me."

He hurried away, his thoughts busy with many things. Yes, it would perhaps be wise to warn his mother and Marian of the impending storm; and his advice now would carry weight when the real trouble came.

"Harry is coming to Llanberis to my wedding," he said abruptly, on rejoining them; he was a little out of breath. "And he suggests that it will be just as well to have another hasty marriage at an early date!" He laughed with some constraint. "The fact is, father and the Colonel have quarrelled, and they threaten to spite each other by making trouble between their children. Harry will call at Euston Square—possibly to-day."

The engine whistled, and the carriage doors were being slammed.

"I must take my seat. Oh, yes, Harry and I have talked it all over pretty exhaustively, and you and he will have my active sympathy! He is fully prepared for every eventuality. I call it monstrous for parents to interfere at so late a stage, and, for the sake of some petty quarrel of their own, ruthlessly to insist on the wrecking of their children's entire future—that is, if their children are fools enough to obey meekly!"

He was thinking of Colonel Mayhew's cold and contemptuous stare, of his father's despairing rage,

Marian laid a trembling hand upon his arm and murmured—

"Dear old Vic—I wish you all the success and happiness that you deserve!"

"We have always been chums, little sister, and it seems that we shall both start our new lives with love in a cottage. It would be nice if we could live near to each other; you will love Hilda when you know her."

He kissed his mother and sister fondly and stepped into the train, and the guard blew his whistle.

"Stand back there! Right away!"

"Good-bye, mother!" said Victor. "Good-bye, Mab! You will send me the news? And, if I must run up to London, you can always depend upon my help."

The train was moving, and he waved his hat. There were tears in the eyes of both women, who carried that recollection of the idolised son and brother in their hearts for years.

CHAPTER VI.

UNDER the guidance of Miss Lewis, Hilda Carrington became transformed from a dowdy schoolgirl into a stylish-looking young lady; and the change was effected in a very few hours. In her younger days Miss Lewis had been a lady's-maid, and was a deft needlewoman; and Hilda's tall slim figure, as she declared over and over again, would have delighted the heart of any fashionable *modiste*.

"I want to look nice," Hilda made reply, with a joy that was almost malicious. It was the morning after Victor Linton's departure for London, and she was surveying herself in a long cheval-glass. "How cleverly you have done my hair! I never can keep it tidy! Do you think that the coat will need any alteration?"

"No," Miss Lewis answered, after critically surveying the fit of the costume and touching it here and there. "The bodice was a little too full, that was all. A black hat trimmed with poppies suits you admirably."

Hilda laughed again in that malicious way of hers, and her eyes sparkled.

"How clever you are!" she said. "Your abilities are wasted in this poor little shop!"

Miss Lewis smiled sadly and wistfully.

"It is my own choice, and I am happy and independent. Besides, I am too old now to do the work that would be expected of me. My last mistress left me money enough to keep me for the rest of my days."

"But it is a lonely life!" Hilda said thoughtfully, her face flushing. "I feel I could not live without love now."

Miss Lewis sighed.

"There," Hilda cried gleefully—"don't you think that I look real nice, as the Americans say? What a pity the weather is so bright and warm! I should so like to wear my furs!"

Miss Lewis looked amazed.

"I know you thought it needless extravagance on my part to buy

such a thing," Hilda went on; "but I want to vex Miss Morgan and the girls who have sneered at me behind my back. Never mind—I will wear them to-morrow. I would do anything to annoy them! I wonder what my hateful old uncle will think of the news I sent him last night! You have quite finished, Miss Lewis? Thank you so much! Now I am going to make a call upon the Rector; and I shall endeavour to meet Miss Morgan and the girls somewhere."

Miss Lewis smiled feebly.

"You are a most fortunate girl, Miss Carrington!"

"Yes—I think I am," Hilda answered slowly. "But it is a long lane that has no turning, and until now my life has been so dreary!"

She drew on her gloves and picked up her sunshade.

"What a little wretch I am!" she thought, as she stepped into the street. "Oh, but it is so sweet to be revenged upon my enemies!"

Then, as she became conscious of the glances of passers-by who had known her at the school, her heart thrilled. How respectful everybody had become all at once! The baker who supplied the school with bread touched his cap.

"'Fine feathers make fine birds'!" thought Hilda.

On reaching the Rectory she rang the bell, remembering as she did so that she really had no business with Mr. Jarvis. There was a flush on her cheeks and a sparkle in her dark eyes, and her heart beat wildly. It was a shame to interrupt the good man at that unconventional hour, but she wanted to thank him for his kindness, and——

At that moment the door was opened by Mrs. Jarvis, and Hilda's brow clouded; the Rector's wife had always been a thorn in her side.

"Oh, it is you, Miss Carrington!"—scrutinising the defiant-looking girl from head to foot. "You wish to see the Rector? Come in, if you please!" Her manner was almost genial. "Mr. Jarvis is in his study—sermon day, you know—always a nuisance. No one must speak; and, as for the children practising on the piano—— Well, men rarely do have any thought for any one except themselves!"

"Pray don't let me interrupt the Rector!" Hilda said hastily. "My business is of no importance, Mrs. Jarvis."

"Nonsense, my dear Miss Carrington! It can't be of less importance than sermons for which he gets the most scanty stipend. Besides, you must hear the news about Sir John Carrington."

"Sir John Carrington?" Hilda's head was held haughtily erect. "I don't think that any news concerning Sir John can be of interest to me."

She remembered her letter to him—jubilant, scornful, defiant. Her heart had been made very bitter by the cruel wrongs that she had endured so long, and she had not paused to pick and choose her language.

"Now listen to my husband making all that noise—and no one else in the house dares to speak on sermon day!"

Hilda stood irresolute. She disliked and despised Mrs. Jarvis, whom she considered a peevish, vain, selfish woman. Never before had the Rector's wife spoken so kindly to her or looked at her so pleasantly.

The Rector's sonorous voice rose and fell, and his wife held up one finger.

"Wait until he's done! That's the noise I have to put up with for hours together. He reads his sermons over half a dozen times before he is satisfied with them."

A moment later Mrs. Jarvis burst into the study, and the Rector uttered a mild protest, compressed into two little words—

"My dear!"

"Andrew, just put that stuff away for a bit; here is Miss Carrington. I was quite tired of waiting out there in the passage! But of course you mustn't be interrupted!"

The Rector advanced, holding out a hand kindly. He could not disguise his amazement at Hilda's altered appearance; she looked years older.

"I oughtn't to have come bothering you just now," she began.

"Sit down, my dear! I have just finished my sermon," he added, flushing faintly, and glancing at a small pile of manuscript.

"I told Miss Carrington that you usually had a rest about this time," his wife remarked. "Now you had better tell the young lady about the accident to Sir John Carrington, and the inquiries that his servants have been making here."

Hilda turned deathly pale. An accident to Sir John? Oh, that cruel letter!

"You know nothing of it, I see," the Rector said. "Well, Sir John was hurt a week or more since, during one of his wild midnight rides. There was no moon, and, galloping at his usual headlong speed, he put

his horse at a fence, and the animal jumped short, falling backwards, and seriously injuring Sir John's spine. At first he treated the accident lightly, but now he knows that he has not long to live. No one heard anything of the affair in the village until this morning, and I was coming to see you as soon as I had finished my sermon." He glanced sorrowfully at his manuscript.

"You ought to have gone at once!" his wife exclaimed.

Hilda flashed an indignant glance at Mrs. Jarvis, but the Rector's wife was smiling at her sweetly.

"I am very sorry to hear of the accident to Sir John," the girl said, "but it cannot affect me in any way. He has always regarded me in the light of an encumbrance, and I can never forget that he had me thrust from his doors."

"My dear child, you must forgive if you cannot forget!" the Rector answered gently. "Sir John has evidently repented of his harshness, for he wishes to see you at the Castle."

Hilda's face flushed again.

"It is impossible, Mr. Jarvis! I wrote to him last night. Had I known that he was ill, I should not have done so. I think that I told him how much I hated him and his money; and I know that I boasted of my forthcoming marriage, and gloried in the fact that I should be dependent upon his miserable charity no longer. No—he will not wish to see me after that. I want nothing from him; but you can tell him how sorry I am that he is ill!"

The Rector smiled blandly.

"Your letter has done no harm, Miss Carrington. Sir John is just the sort of man to be pleased with it. He sent a carriage to Harlech School for you not an hour since, and Miss Morgan referred the driver to me."

Hilda's dark eyes flashed.

"A bitter pill for Miss Morgan!" she said. The colour came and went in her cheeks, and she found herself breathing hard. "What must I do, Mr. Jarvis?"

"There is no question about that. I told Sir John's man that I would take you to the Castle this afternoon. I did not want you to be taken by surprise; and fortunately your letter did not contain your new address. You will go, of course?"

He regarded her anxiously.

"I don't want to, but I suppose I must. I certainly should not enter the Castle but for Sir John's illness!"

"My dear, it may mean so much for you!" Mrs. Jarvis murmured.

"Do you think that I would touch one penny of my uncle's money?" the girl demanded scornfully. "I would rather work my fingers to the bone, after the manner in which he has treated me!"

"You would think differently after experiencing such poverty as ours!" Mrs. Jarvis said plaintively. "I gave myself to Mr. Jarvis when I was young and innocent——"

"Yes—I will be ready to go with you at three o'clock," Hilda said to the long-suffering Rector. "And I can never thank you sufficiently for your thoughtful kindness."

She rose, and the Rector regarded her earnestly.

"Three o'clock, Miss Carrington. And I beg of you not to permit your pride and your temper—pardon me for saying it—to stand in the way of your whole future! I have no respect for wealth as such or for people in high places——"

"That is just where we shall never agree," interrupted his wife.

Hilda took her leave, outwardly calm, but with her heart in a tumult.

Mrs. Jarvis saw her to the door, and then watched her from the window.

"She'll be a great lady yet, Andrew! And I have hardly got a rag to my back—and it's more than six months before the next Easter offerings are due! I'm sure everybody looks down upon me, and I'm ashamed to have anybody in the drawing-room, what with the shabby carpet and the old-fashioned overmantel. Why, I declare if she hasn't passed right by Miss Morgan and the schoolgirls without looking! Standing on her dignity already! I should like to see how she'll snub that beggarly young lawyer now! Oh, there's baby!"

Mrs. Jarvis flounced away, and the Rector heaved a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER VII.

HILDA CARRINGTON'S mind was in a perfect turmoil of conflicting thought. It was remarkable that Sir John should have sent for her—remarkable in every way! That he had hated her she was fully convinced; his undisguised cruelty through Miss Morgan, and his fierce glance at her when they had once met accidentally, had haunted her like an evil dream. Was this a scheme of his to heap upon her some fresh indignity? Was he really injured as seriously as his servants had stated to the Rector?

While these questions were racing through her mind the local doctor's old carriage came rumbling through the lanes. One of the Doctor's children attended Harlech School, and Miss Carrington was not a stranger to him, although hitherto he had ignored her. Her reputation had been so bad! Now however he signalled to his coachman to stop, and called Miss Carrington by name. She faced him in her haughty resentful way.

"Miss Carrington, I thought—I hoped—that you were at Woodcroft Castle by this time! I was with Sir John at an early hour this morning." He paused, and regarded her questioningly.

"I have only just heard of Sir John's illness, Doctor Davies. Is he—is he really ill?"

The Doctor raised his eyebrows, as though irritated by the question.

"Ill?" he answered sternly. "He is dying! Sir John was injured a week ago, and, with his usual perversity, would not permit a doctor to be sent for. However the end would have been all the same, though his intense suffering might have been alleviated to some extent. He has suddenly expressed a desire for your presence at the Castle; and, if you have any consideration for your future welfare—if for no other reason—I should advise you to obey him."

His voice was cold and slightly sneering. He had no liking for the erratic quick-tempered girl, whose dark eyes flashed angrily while he was speaking.

"My future, for good or ill, is not in the hands of Sir John Carrington!" Hilda said haughtily. "The Rector has promised to escort me to the Castle this afternoon. I am sorry that my uncle is ill, but I cannot pretend any affection where none exists."

She turned abruptly and continued her way towards the town.

"How I hate this place and all the people in it!" she thought wrathfully. "They dislike me, distrust me, and regard me as some creature of evil. And what have I done to deserve it? Merely resented their cruel oppression! Oh, yes—I boxed the girls' ears, and defied Miss Morgan! I know that, and I would do it again if they taunted me." Then her face brightened and softened. "But I shall always have one warm corner in my heart for Llanberis; for was it not here that I met my love, who protected me from my enemies and set me free?"

At first Miss Lewis was incredulous, amazed, when Hilda told her the news; then she said—

"I am glad. Matters will straighten themselves out, and you will be a great lady, Miss Carrington."

Hilda flushed and paled.

"What do you mean, Miss Lewis? Do you think that I would touch one penny of my uncle's money—the money of the man who has systematically ill-treated me and had me starved from my childhood? And I am not so blind that I do not grasp the situation now! He has it in his mind to give me a parting shot, and I have determined to bear it because he is dying. I will not say one word in anger or reproach."

Miss Lewis appeared to be somewhat perturbed.

"It is a pity in one way, and I hope that Sir John's life will be prolonged; for his death would interfere with your wedding."

"In what way?"

"In what way? My dear child, you could not be married immediately after your uncle's death!"

"It would not affect me in the least."

Miss Lewis was horrified.

"A wedding and a funeral! Married in black! It would be positively unchristian!"

"I shall not go into mourning; I cannot afford it, after buying these new clothes. Oh, don't bother any more about it, please! Luncheon? No, thanks—I will just have a cup of tea. I have no

doubt that Sir John will be surprised to see me dressed respectably," she added.

A little before three o'clock the Rector's hired carriage drew up at the door of Miss Lewis's shop, and Miss Lewis went out to greet the clergyman.

"When will Miss Carrington come back here?" she whispered to him. "She absolutely refuses to take a change of clothing with her; and Sir John may want her to stay with him until the last."

"I can advise nothing. Sir John is a strange man, and his niece represents him worthily"—and he smiled. "But I have hopes of her; she is good at heart. All this may mean misfortune for young Linton, though," he added in a different tone.

At that moment Hilda appeared at the door.

"Misfortune for Mr. Linton?" she repeated. "I could not help hearing the words, Mr. Jarvis. You have always been my friend, and, if you really believe that my visit to the Castle will bring trouble to the only being I care for in all the world, I will not go. What is my uncle to me? Nothing!"

The Rector looked worried and foolish; he had been thinking of the words which his wife had let fall.

"It was a silly speech!" he admitted. "Illness and death, I should have said, always bring trouble in their train. You are ready, Miss Carrington?"

Hilda entered the carriage with the Rector, feeling very depressed. What would Victor think and say of all this?

"It will be a delightful drive," the clergyman remarked; "the scenery is now at its best. The autumn tints——"

"Please don't be tiresome!" interrupted Hilda. "I have other things to think of. And will you order the driver to raise the hood? I don't like being stared at by inquisitive people."

Mr. Jarvis meekly obeyed.

After this there was complete silence between them, while the carriage bore them along the familiar road. Hilda knew every inch of it, every tree and every rock. The mountains were half veiled in a haze of blue; the valley seemed to be sleeping in the soft September sunshine. Now and again the barking of a dog or the crowing of a cock disturbed the stillness.

"I should like the hood to be thrown back now," Hilda said

suddenly. "There is a good view of the Castle beyond the Pass of Llanberis."

She gazed, not at Woodcroft Castle, but away towards a bit of woodland on the lower slope of a great hill. A leaping rivulet flashed in the sunlight; the song of birds was borne to her on the breeze. It was there that Victor Linton had told her of his love—had half mystified, half frightened her with his passionate declaration. She had not understood it then, but now——

"A grand view of Woodcroft Castle!" exclaimed the Rector. "What a magnificent relic of the feudal times! It seems to me a pity that Sir John ever altered the name of the place, and I know that the people hereabouts were hotly indignant over it for a long time."

"Has it not always been known as Woodcroft?" Hilda asked rather aimlessly.

"Oh, dear, no! The original name was Ogof Llech Castle, and the old Welsh people never call it anything else. For centuries it was held by the Idwals, who were called princes until a few generations back. The last died childless some twenty years ago, and, the Castle and estates being found to be mortgaged to their utmost value, Sir John Carrington bought the place right out. People said he had given too much money for Ogof Llech, but no doubt he knew his own business best."

Hilda was slightly interested, for she answered abstractedly—

"So the princes of Idwal are extinct! I heard once that there was a daughter, Lady Mary of Ogof Llech."

The Rector glanced at her sharply.

"Yes—she died long since, fully a year before her father, the last of the race. She was his only child, and some mystery surrounded her death. But—— Ah, here we are at last!"

The carriage pulled up before a granite archway, in the roof of which the groove still remained wherein the portcullis had glided up and down centuries before. Above it was a tower, pierced with eyelet-holes and surmounted by battlements. The broad moat was spanned by a modern bridge, and along its shallow sides wild-flowers flourished in profusion amid the mossy grass.

The lodge-keeper appeared; then the iron gates swung back, and the carriage passed into the courtyard. Hilda could not but contrast her present visit to Woodcroft Castle with the former one. Then she had

with difficulty found her way to the great entrance-hall, and afterwards had been practically thrust from the doors by insolent servants, who now were only too anxious to wait upon her.

The butler came forward to meet them, and the Rector inquired about Sir John.

"No different, sir!" was the solemn answer. "A bad time for some of us; for, with all his faults, he was a good and just master!"

"I suppose that he is anxious about Miss Carrington?"

"Yes—and I am glad that you have prevailed upon the young lady to come." He lowered his voice. "When I refused her admission some time ago, she gave me a look that I shall not readily forget! I hope, Mr. Jarvis, that you will put a good word in for me if Miss Carrington is to become the mistress of Woodcroft Castle."

The Rector smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't suppose I have the slightest influence."

Hilda meanwhile had been approached by the housekeeper, a tall middle-aged woman in a dress of rustling silk.

"Your uncle, Sir John, desires to see you at the earliest possible moment, Miss Carrington," she said unctuously. "I am Mrs. Maxwell, the housekeeper. You will pardon me for introducing myself," she added, for the girl was eyeing her coldly. "Will you go to your room now? And, if you would like any refreshments before seeing Sir John——"

"No—I do not want anything, thank you! I will merely remove my hat and coat." She turned to Mr. Jarvis, who was talking in low tones to the butler. "You will wait for me, please; I shall not be long. I am going to my uncle's room, but shall make the interview as brief as possible."

The Rector bowed gravely; the girl's composure surprised him. Then, from an alcove, Sir John's own man emerged as silent as a shadow. A comprehensive glance, a word with the housekeeper, and he vanished to announce to his master that Miss Carrington had arrived.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE late train from London on the night of Hilda Carrington's journey to Woodcroft Castle brought Victor Linton back to Llanberis.

He was driven from the station to Miss Lewis's shop in the town, and felt considerably chagrined to discover the house in darkness.

"Hilda will have received my telegram," he said to himself, "and is sure to be waiting up to say 'Good night' to me. So here goes!"

He rang the bell noisily, and it seemed to him an unconscionable time before the flicker of a light appeared on the glass transom over the door. Then his heart gave a great bound of delight.

The door opened, and Miss Lewis stood before him, a puzzled look on her face.

"Mr. Linton?" she exclaimed.

"Yes. Miss Lewis, I have returned sooner than I anticipated; but I sent Miss Carrington a telegram."

"Oh, I didn't know that it was from you, but I posted it to her!"

"Posted it to her?" Victor almost shouted. "My dear Miss Lewis, what bad news have you to tell?"

"None, Mr. Linton. But you are so impatient! And I forgot that you could not have heard of the accident to Sir John Carrington."

"Accident to Sir John Carrington?" he repeated with a dazed air.

"Yes; and he cannot recover. So he sent for his niece to-day, and she is at Woodcroft Castle now. I think that it is a wonderful piece of good fortune for her! The Rector will tell you all about it; and you will hear from Miss Carrington to-morrow morning, I have no doubt."

Victor was stunned; he turned away.

"Good night, Mr. Linton!" Miss Lewis called after him, but he did not hear her.

* * * * * *

At Woodcroft Castle the housekeeper, having taken charge of Hilda's hat and jacket, said, speaking gently and with a smile—

"Will you follow me, Miss Carrington?"

They passed into a second hall, which was lofty and spacious. Through a great dome of glass a flood of light fell upon the polished oak floor and wide staircase. The walls were lined with portraits of dead-and-gone Idwals of Ogof Llech, and statuary gleamed in every niche.

"These are the rooms which Sir John ordered to be prepared for your reception, Miss Carrington," Mrs. Maxwell said, when they reached the first floor.

"For my reception? But I have no intention of staying at Woodcroft!"

The valet came up at this moment.

"Sir John would like to see Miss Carrington at once—and alone," he said in a low tone.

A momentary feeling of trepidation stirred the girl's heart, and she knew that her lips were quivering.

She caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror. How pale her face was! And her black locks were disordered. But she said coldly—

"I am ready."

"My dear child, you have nothing to fear!" the housekeeper murmured as the valet withdrew.

"Fear? I have no fear! Please do not talk such nonsense to me!" —drawing herself up. "I am waiting for you."

Mrs. Maxwell was startled, and gasped an apology, of which Hilda took no notice. Then she led the way to her master's room. The valet, who was waiting there, knocked at the door, and a deep voice from within responded.

By a great effort, Hilda nerved herself, and a moment later entered the sick man's chamber. The door closed softly behind her, and she stood almost breathless, wondering what would happen next. A large bedstead of carved oak occupied a darkened corner of the room; it appeared to be almost completely enveloped by heavy curtains of crimson silk.

"So you have condescended to visit me?" said the deep voice that had answered the valet's knock.

A white hand thrust the curtains aside, and Hilda saw the gleam of two black eyes. She shrank back involuntarily, and Sir John Carrington uttered a regretful sigh.

"Come here," he said gently, "and sit down beside me! I am an

ogre no longer; and I could not hurt you if I would—I am dying. My spine is broken, the doctors say; and they ought to know. I thought that I had merely suffered a severe sprain; but it does not matter—I am glad to go. Won't you come and sit here, and let me take your hand?" he pleaded. Hilda was regarding him wonderingly and pityingly.

"But we are enemies!" The sound of her own voice startled her.

"Enemies?" The heavy brows were lowering and the black eyes flashed. "No, no, little elf! I have not troubled to know you sooner, for many reasons; and I may have misjudged you—I believe that I have. You are a true Carrington, I think, though not a daughter of your father. Ah, now I can see your face better! You are not so good-looking as you might be if you would curb your spiteful temper," he chuckled.

"Have you sent for me to make fun of me?" Hilda demanded. "Have I not endured enough already at your hands? I have no desire to be good-looking to please you."

"Call me 'uncle,'" he said, unmoved.

"I will not! There is no affection between us."

"You are acting a contemptible part, little elf! I am helpless, or I would rise and box your ears." His deep voice softened. "Hilda, I have no desire to make fun of you; I have sent for you to Woodcroft Castle because this is your future home. You will be mistress of an estate worth a quarter of a million and with a rent-roll of ten thousand pounds a-year!"

Hilda's face became deathly pale.

"You have willed all this to me?" she asked tremulously.

"I have," he replied.—"When?"

"After receiving your impudent letter this morning. My lawyer has not yet left the Castle, and the will is here, under my pillow. Whether I destroy it or not depends upon yourself. My previous will is still in existence, Miss Carrington."

There was a momentary silence. Hilda's heart was throbbing.

"I meant every word I wrote," she said at last; "and I will not give up my independence for all the wealth in the world!"

"The poor are never independent. I ask you to give up a life of penury in exchange for this; and, in doing so, I atone in a measure for my previous dislike of you."

"Is that all?" she asked faintly.

"No; the mistress of Woodcroft Castle must make a suitable marriage if she must marry at all."

Hilda's eyes flashed.

"Further discussion is needless. I would not give up my lover for a kingdom!"

"A penniless young lawyer—a struggling scribbler?"

"Uncle"—the word trembled on her lips—"my lover is a man—that is sufficient for me! In a little while we are to be married; I am wearing his gifts now. He cared for me when I was lonely; he rescued me from a life of oppression and misery; but for his love I might have become a soured and evil-minded woman! I don't want your money; but, if you are so ill, I will stay with you until—until the last, if you wish me to do so."

Sir John did not speak; his chin had sunk lower on his chest. He groped for the girl's hand, and Hilda saw that there were tears in his eyes.

"Little elf," he said at length, "you have won my heart! You are a Carrington through and through. My will stands; and I shall be glad to see your manly sweetheart. Where is he? Send for him. I did but try you; and my long injustice towards you comes home to me now with a bitterness that is tempered only by the knowledge that things will be made right at the last. You must not leave me. I may live for a week, but I may be dead to-morrow"—gazing at her wistfully. "Now I am going to tell you some things concerning myself, and to ask you one or two questions. You must bear with me patiently."

Hilda felt his clasp on her hand tighten, and her heart warmed towards him. How utterly lonely his life must have been!

"I will stay at the Castle, as you wish it, uncle," she promised. "I can tell the Rector to send on my things to-night."

"The Rector?" He frowned.

"Mr. Jarvis brought me here; and he is waiting down-stairs," Hilda said gently.

Sir John muttered something that was unintelligible to his niece, then added—

"Ah, well—after all, I know nothing of the present Rector! His predecessor deceived me, and I washed my hands of the Church."

"Mr. Jarvis has always been my friend," Hilda said; "and he is a good man."

"I am glad to hear it! I will see him before he goes away. Now, little elf, come closer to me, and listen to a few things which I must say to you. I have no need to question your truthfulness; I am certain that you would scorn even the semblance of a prevarication."

His burning eyes were fixed on Hilda's pale face, and there he saw a sufficient answer.

"And yet I have disliked and avoided you for years because I believed that you were a true daughter of your father! You wonder why I hate and despise him? Because he did me the bitterest wrong that one man can do to another; because he has been all his life an incubus upon me, and his evil deeds haunt me on my death-bed! Do you think that he is in India still?"

Hilda was startled by the question.

"I have never heard to the contrary, uncle. My father has not shown any interest in me since he sent me to England."

"Poor child! But the scoundrel knows all that has been going on, I am sure. At this moment he is in England; he has been in England for years, living on his wits—and upon me. I have honoured bills that I never signed in order to save our good name, and to save him from the punishment he so richly deserves."

Hilda was horrified. Had her handsome good-for-nothing father sunk so low?

"And you must beware of him in the future," continued Sir John. "I am glad that you are soon to be married to a man who will stand none of his nonsense. People here have called me mad; and I wonder that I am not so in very truth! I don't know that I should tell you these things, except in palliation of my seeming eccentricity and unnatural conduct towards you, and to warn you against the hypocrisy and the villainy of your father."

He paused, and Hilda wiped the gathering moisture from his brow. Then she listened with tingling ears.

"Thirty years ago people were pleased to say that I was a clever fellow. I had been called to the bar, and there was every probability that a brilliant career in that profession lay before me. But visions of silk and the woolsack were swept away by a sudden passion for politics,

and my writings and speeches attracted universal attention. This decided me, and I soon became a prominent personage in the political world. In my new life I made both friends and foes. Among the latter was the last owner of Woodcroft Castle, Glyder Idwal, a fiery Welshman, who hated me and my principles with a heartiness that was quite refreshing. We met in London, at a club, and, he being a much older man, I submitted to a wordy castigation. Believing that he had the power to alter my views, he evinced a paternal sort of friendship towards me, and finally invited me to his town house. I went; and there I saw his daughter, and knew that she was the one woman in the world for me.

"Hilda, my child, I loved but dissembled. Can you blame me for playing a double part until I felt perfectly sure of my ground? The daughter of the old Welshman was the very apple of his eye, but he would have seen her dead rather than that she should wed one of my political creed. He had faith in his powers of reformation however, and I pretended to be impressed by his arguments.

"My only confidant was my young brother—your father!"

CHAPTER IX.

HILDA recalled the fierce gaze of her uncle when she had encountered him in the wood, and she covered her face with her hands.

"Poor little elf," Sir John said half tenderly—"I am frightening you!" He caressed her hand. "I would not tell you, but I must—I must, not only to explain my own conduct towards you, but for your future protection against the man who is your father. Let me look into your eyes! Ah, how like they are to mine! We are both true Carringtons—dark of eye, dark of skin. But your father is fair—a handsome smiling villain!"

He clenched his teeth, and was silent for a little while; then he sighed wearily.

"Let me finish my story now, for I never wish to refer to it again," he resumed. "I loved Glyder Idwal's daughter; and for her dear sake I was ready to sacrifice all save the actual principles of the cause I represented. It was an easy matter to play the part I had chosen here, and I think that Lady Mary understood it all from the very first. We cared for each other only as matured and intense natures can care, and her father revelled in the victory he had achieved. He was a bigot, an egoist, an enthusiast, though in most things a good and sensible man.

"About this time your father came upon the scene. He had already left the service, and looked to my influence for advancement in some remunerative civil capacity. He was a handsome devil-may-care fellow, who followed at my heels like an obedient dog. I knew that he was shallow and weak, but I did not dream that there was any real harm in him then. In a way, I was proud of my young brother; and he made himself useful to me on many occasions.

"I introduced him to the old Prince of Ogof Llech, and he was cordially invited to the Castle. From the very first Lady Mary did not like or trust him, and she besought me not to make a confidant of him.

I laughed at her woman's fears, but I was a little vexed. I told her that she ought to like my brother for my sake, that he would be faithful to me. As for his being my confidant, I had no secrets from him, and he would be best man at our wedding.

"Shortly after this I was called back to London on a matter of urgent business, but he stayed behind. I left Ogof Llech apparently in good health, to arrive in London delirious. It was one of those sudden attacks to which strong men are always liable.

"For several weeks all was a blank to me; and when I awoke to a real knowledge of things it was to learn that Glyder Idwal had discovered what he termed my 'perfidy,' and fiercely repudiated any claim I might have upon his daughter's affections. He would sooner see her dead at his feet than that she should become the bride of a man of my ruthless principles. Furthermore, he and his daughter were going abroad, and it would be useless for me to think of following them. Thus he had written to me. At first I was stunned; and my brother was sympathetic. He had been requested to leave the Castle, he said. And, as for Lady Mary, she was quite resigned to her father's will; he was convinced that she had said as much.

"I wrote several letters, but they were returned to me. As soon as my strength permitted I went to Ogof Llech Castle. The servants knew nothing, and greeted me sullenly. The master and the young mistress were gone; I had driven them away—I and my brother. The English were a hateful grasping people.

"But there was work for me to do, and this softened the sting of my loss—of my humiliating defeat. I would have staked my life upon Lady Mary's constancy, whereas it had been more fugitive than a breath of summer mist—a dream and nothing more! I had given the best of my heart, and now my heart was dead within me. If I was powerless to communicate with Lady Mary, my address was known to her. But there came not a word, and I thought her false and frail.

"At length the government offered me an important and lucrative post in India. I accepted it eagerly, and my brother went with me. I will not speak of my life there except to say that I was successful in what I had to do, for my services gained me a grant—a large sum of

money from the nation. That money I have invested here. In the meantime I had become disgusted with my brother's peccadilloes—he had become a gambler and drunkard, and upon the strength of our relationship had ingratiated himself into the best circles of society. All sorts of stories were afloat concerning him, until his adventurous career terminated for the nonce in marriage. I was rather relieved to hear of this, particularly when I had positive assurances that his wife was a lady of good family. But I believe that he broke her heart; she survived your birth only a few weeks.

"Events now occurred which placed an eternal barrier between my brother and myself; indeed, they hastened my departure from India, and I hoped that I had done with him for ever."

Sir John paused, and motioned to Hilda to give him a cooling drink which stood upon a table near at hand. Beads of perspiration were on his brow, and his parched lips quivered from emotion.

"I returned to England," he continued, "and my fellow-countrymen made much of me. It was said that my diplomatic abilities had prevented a devastating war. But my fame afforded me little pleasure; I had done my duty and was satisfied. I had but one desire, and that was to hide myself from my fellow-men; life had no further charms for me."

Sir John paused, and gazed half wistfully into Hilda's sympathetic eyes.

"Why do you look at me like that?" he asked. "Ah, my little elf, I can read your thoughts! Cling to my hand until I have done; and don't interrupt me. I am growing weary, and soon shall be able to sleep peacefully, with the knowledge that I have righted a wrong. And then you shall play and sing to me—just one little song to soothe me, like a child, with a lullaby." He smiled ever so faintly. "Yes—I guessed your thoughts; you were wondering if I had forgotten Mary Idwal—the only woman I had ever loved, the only woman I ever could love—and you have already condemned me for accepting my fate without a braver fight."

"No—no!" Hilda whispered. "I only——"

"Yes—I know what you think. Wait a little while! My conduct was not that of the lover whose faith remains unshaken through the

stormiest of trials; but I had believed my brother, and circumstances confirmed that belief. I had a proud and fiery temper, too; but I never quite succeeded in banishing the image of Mary from my heart. In the silence of the night the murmur of her voice has been in my ears, and her reproachful eyes have seemed to gaze into mine. When I stood again on British soil, an irresistible desire seized me to see my frail love, if only from a distance—if she were still free. It was both pleasure and pain even to a careworn man of the world to live once more in the happy hopeful past.

"One sunny morning in spring I left London and came here to Llanberis. When I saw the towers of Ogof Llech, my heart leaped within me; I felt young again. I went to an inn, but the people had forgotten me; I was indeed greatly changed in appearance and in manner. My name was not remembered.

"I told the landlord and his wife that I would stay with them for a week—hundreds of tourists did the same thing every year, so little notice was taken of that; then I asked if the owner of Ogof Llech Castle was at home. I had known the old chieftain years before, I said, but I had been abroad.

"The man signalled to his wife to leave the room, and then stared hard at me. At last he appeared to be satisfied, and a dark frown wrinkled his brow.

"'Ah, I recollect you now!' he said. 'You are the false Englishman who loved and rode away, as the song goes—who left the Lady Mary to die! I have no room for you at my inn; find room elsewhere, and take back your money.'

"'No,' I answered fiercely, setting my back against the door—'I will hear the whole story from your lips! Tell me where I can find Lady Mary!'

"'In the churchyard at Llanberis!' was the man's answer.

"My brain swam, and I clutched at the air. My love was dead! Perhaps she had been faithful to the last!

"The innkeeper led me to a seat, but his stern features did not relax.

"'You must leave my house—I will not have you here! Glyder Idwal is dead, and his daughter walked into the lake one winter's night!

Her wraith may be seen when the moon is at the full. Now get you gone!'

"He held the door wide open, and told his servant to put my luggage outside, adding with a sneer—

"'The Castle is open if you would like to look through it—open for the inspection of the public—because it is for sale, to pay the creditors of the last of the Glyder Idwals!'

"I made him no answer—my brain was on fire. Lady Mary dead! And she had been true to me to the very last, and perhaps died believing me to be false! I think that my reason tottered in that hour.

"I went to another inn. The Castle was for sale, and it should be mine. For the first time I thanked Heaven that I was a wealthy man; and when the day of the sale of Ogof Llech Castle arrived I was ready with my money.

"Immediately the bidding began I named a sum which struck many of the other would-be purchasers dumb. Then I doubled it, and they thought that I was mad. The Castle and its dependencies were mine!"

Sir John's deep voice increased in volume until it filled the chamber, and the smouldering fire in his black eyes flashed forth. Then he was silent for some minutes, and a sob passed his lips, a tear trickled down one pale cheek.

"My story is nearly done, Hilda, though the bitterest part has still to come. The Castle was mine, and I changed its name to Woodcroft—people talked so much of the ghost of Ogof Llech. I had to get servants from London, and it was a long time before I could gather about me a staff of faithful ones.

"For weeks—nay, months—I listened to every scrap of talk concerning the woman I had loved. I visited her grave daily, and covered it with the flowers she had loved in life; I searched every nook and cranny of the Castle for things that had belonged to her, for scraps of her writing; and the rooms she had occupied were entered by none but myself. Here, from time to time, I placed all that had been hers, and here I held communion with the spirit which was mine still. Hilda, you will find a packet in that desk over there. Open it, and remember that my wishes are that it shall be buried with me!"

The girl obeyed wonderingly.

"One moment," proceeded Sir John—"then you shall read it for yourself! I discovered the packet in a secret drawer, together with Lady Mary's diary. The faded portrait and the jewelry will not interest you; merely read the letter—it is a voice from the grave, revealing the treachery of the brother whom I had loved and trusted."

The sick man's glowing eyes followed Hilda's every movement, and, when she smoothed out the letter before her, his features worked convulsively.

"Read it aloud—aloud!" he commanded. "Then I shall know that my conduct towards you is vindicated!"

And, in a voice that she vainly strove to keep steady, Hilda read as follows—

"'My beloved—So long a time has gone by without one word of you that I begin to fancy that some evil power is at work to keep us apart. We are in Rome, my father and I; but my resolution is so strong that he has become quite reconciled to our immediate marriage, as we planned together in the delightful summer days. He complains now that your brother, Captain Vane Carrington, poisoned his mind against you in terms which will not bear repetition; and in such circumstances I think that it is my duty to tell you that Captain Carrington made love to me in your absence, and proposed marriage to me. His treachery and vanity are past all understanding! Then he begged of me on his knees never to tell you—that it was only momentary madness—and I promised that, so long as he did not offend any more, the matter should remain a secret between us, but I should prefer that we never met again, as I utterly despised him.

"'He did not leave the Castle at once, because you were abroad, and none of us knew where you were. I cannot think why you should go in this way, unless there is some State secret at the bottom of it. Or are you angry with my father for the letter he sent by your brother? But surely you would not be angry with me, for I wrote at the same time telling you of my eternal love, and that my father's vanity was only hurt a little! Your brother promised to deliver both letters, and was so truly penitent that I was sorry for him. But this is the third

time I have written to you, and not a word have I received to soothe my anxiety. Oh, my darling, come to me soon, or my heart will break!

"'Yours till death, and after, "'MARY IDWAL.'"

"Read the writing on the back, Hilda," Sir John said tremulously "It is dated two days later."

The girl read—

"'I think that life is ended for me. John has gone—has left me—and I know not where to address him now. His brother has written that he cares for me no longer; and in my misery I pray to Heaven to send me strength!'"

Hilda was horror-stricken. And this was the work of her father! How she loathed him!

"Do you wonder now that I hated my brother and his child?" Sir John asked.

"Wonder? I think that I should have killed him!" She sobbed bitterly.

"Put back the letter. No—give it to me; it shall lie near my heart until I am dead! And you will see that it is buried with me? I have righted you at last, little elf. But beware of him!"

He closed his eyes wearily, and Hilda sat still, her lips quivering, her heart too full for words. Again she saw a tear on Sir John's cheek, and she wiped it away.

"I am happy at last," he murmured. "I leave the world in peace; and soon I shall meet my love again."

He seemed to sleep for a little while, then opened his eyes.

"You can sing—the Carringtons were all singers—and you can play? There is a piano over there; I have had it brought up here for you because I want you to stay with me until the last. Play something—anything you like. And kiss me, little elf!"

His eyes rested on the girl as she moved to do his bidding, and he sighed—a sigh of satisfaction.

Hilda forced back the sobs as they rose to her throat, and her fingers glided tenderly over the keys of the piano. What should she play—what should she sing? Almost unconsciously the words of an old song

floated across her memory, and she gave utterance to them softly, dreamily—

"'One touch there is of magic white,
Surpassing southern mountains' snow,
That lends to sails the dying light—
There, where the dark ships onward go,
Upon the golden highway broad
That leads up to the Isles of God!

"'One touch of light more magic yet,
Of rarer snow 'neath moon or star,
Where, with her graceful sails all set,
Some happy vessel seen afar,
As if in an enchanted sleep,
Steers o'er the tremulous silvered deep!

"'O ship, O sail, far must ye be
Ere gleams like that upon you light,
O'er golden spaces of the sea,
From mysteries of the lucent night!
Such touch comes never to the boat
Wherein across the waves we float.

"'O gleams more magic and divine,
Life's whitest sail ye still refuse,
And, flying on before us, shine
Upon some distant bar ye choose!
By night or day, across the spray,
That sail is ever far away.'"

Then followed a spell of silence, strange and almost weird. Hilda's heart was too full for words, her eyes were blinded by a mist of tears.

"Shall I sing again, uncle?" she said at last.

He did not answer.

She rose and walked softly to the bedside. He was sleeping; there was a smile about the firm lips, and his eyes were closed. In his right hand he grasped the letter of the woman he had loved.

He was sleeping indeed—the sleep of death!

CHAPTER X.

After a restless night, Victor Linton awoke with a start. Dawn had been breaking when he dropped into the first fitful slumber, but the sun was now high in the heavens. A shimmering golden bar of light lay across the carpet, and mingling with the chirping of birds was the mournful sound of the passing-bell. He listened for a while, half in affright, then sprang out of bed, and swiftly drew up the blind. It was a perfect autumn morning; the sky was blue and clear, the sunshine was brilliant.

Victor dressed hastily, the solemn tolling clanging in his ears. He knew intuitively that the master of Woodcroft was dead, and his thoughts were with Hilda; he wondered what responsibility had been laid upon her shoulders.

"Nothing like a bath and a gleam of sunshine to dispel the shadows and phantoms of a restless night!" he thought, while vigorously applying his towel. "And yet"—he glanced through the window out upon the beautiful world—"I am not superstitious." His thoughts ran on. "Not a bit of it, but I cannot help feeling that everything has changed for me in the past twenty-four hours—the trouble at home and my father's disappointment! He was a little bit harsh—poor old dad! —but he will be more reasonable some day. Then the marvellous change in Colonel Mayhew—he positively cut me dead! Hang him!" Victor tossed the towel aside savagely, and turned his attention to a refractory button. "But the worst of all is Sir John Carrington's sudden partiality for my little Hilda. He has neglected and wronged her all these years, and at the end comes between us and happiness. If he is dead—and I know that he must be, from that infernal bell, which rasps every nerve—our marriage this week is out of the question. And he might leave her a little of his money, which would be another nuisance, in the circumstances. I want to work for Hilda, and where could man find a sweeter inspiration? Everything is muddled into a frightful 'pie'!"

He went down-stairs, and his landlady met him with a solemn face.

"Sir John Carrington's dead, sir. The Rector called to see you an hour ago, but I didn't like to disturb you, as you went to bed so late. Shall I bring your breakfast now?"

"Yes—a cup of coffee only. I must go to the Rectory; I am sorry that I overslept myself. Any letters? Ah—thank you!"

He hoped that the solitary letter was from Hilda, but it was not. One swift glance revealed the embossed name of his father's firm on the flap. But the handwriting—could it be his father's? There was a strange fluttering at his heart, and, hearing the landlady's footstep at the door, he thrust the envelope into his pocket unopened.

The coffee was brought in, with a plate of hot toast.

"As I'd got the toast ready, I thought I might as well bring it in, Mr. Linton. I'm sure you don't look well this morning!" She fidgeted round the table. "If I could tempt you with a new-laid egg——"

"No, thank you."

"It must have been a shock to you to hear of Miss Carrington being sent for by Sir John! She'll be a great lady after all, the Rector says."

"The Rector oughtn't to gossip. Now, Mrs. Gwyn, don't bother me—there's a good woman!" He drank his coffee standing. "Will you hand me my hat, if you please?"

The landlady pursed up her lips and frowned.

"I hate gossips," she answered virtuously—"and I sha'n't hear our Rector called no such name, Mr. Linton! There's your hat, sir, and you'd better brush it yourself! You've been at Llanberis long enough for me to begin to take a motherly interest in you, and I hope to goodness things won't begin to go wrong! You look awful worried, and no girl ain't worth it!"

"Mrs. Gwyn, you are talking arrant nonsense!"

The landlady faced him defiantly.

"No, I ain't! There's the young lady you were going to marry! Well, it was all right while she was what she was—not but what I thought it was a shame, and you such a nice open young gentleman!—but now she isn't what she was, and has got all Sir John's money—a quarter of a million, the Rector says. Everybody here knows what

them Carringtons are, and I want to prepare you for a disappointment —that's all."

Victor laughed nervously.

"I appreciate your motives, Mrs. Gwyn. And we have been the best of friends for weeks; but, if the good understanding existing between us is to continue, don't you breathe a word of disparagement about Miss Carrington, even if she jilts me, as you are trying to insinuate that she will! I am not sure that I can honourably bind her to the bargain now that she is rich and I am poor. It is a most unfortunate interruption," he added as he put on his hat and strode to the door.

At that very moment a telegraph-boy appeared and handed him a message. It ran—

"Better return to town at once. Your mother needs you.—HARRY MAYHEW."

He squeezed it into a ball and stood irresolute.

"No answer"—to the messenger, who was waiting.

"I may have to return to London, Mrs. Gwyn," he said, turning to his landlady, "so do not make any preparations for dinner or anything else on my account."

Then he walked off without another word, and Mrs. Gwyn looked after him compassionately.

"He's preparing himself for what he knows will happen," she thought. "It was a pity that he ever set eyes on that vixenish girl!"

"Your mother needs you—your mother needs you!" were the words that repeated themselves incessantly in Victor's mind. The telegram which had told him this was a vague alarming one. What was the matter with his mother? Less than twenty-four hours ago he had left her in perfect health. What a fool Mayhew was to wire such rubbish! He ground his teeth.

"Yes—I had better telegraph to him for particulars; I can't leave Llanberis until I have seen Hilda. Is my cup of happiness to be dashed away?" He suddenly remembered his father's letter; perhaps that would explain a little. He opened it with quick nervous fingers. Yes—it explained a great deal, and he groaned as he read it.

"My Son—I could anathematise you for the disgrace and misery your selfish and insane conduct has brought upon our name. It is all through

this mania of yours for scribbling stuff which nobody but fools will read in these days. I have been hoping for weeks that I might take you into my confidence at last, and that together we should pull through and leave the name of Linton untarnished; but now the end is near, for I am alone in my trials, and my spirit is broken. My boy, why did you leave me? I ought not to blame you, perhaps; you had no knowledge of our insolvency—that we had been insolvent for many years, and that we have kept going upon the money of our clients.

"The first false step was mine; and you were a child then. I was eager to make a fortune quickly, as most young and ambitious men are, and I listened to the glowing story of an expert in mining affairs. He knew of a tract of land which was for sale cheap. It was in Wales, not a hundred miles from the place where you are now staying. Beneath its surface was a perfect mine of wealth—a wide seam of anthracite coal. No one believed in it—no one indeed suspected it. The expert alone had discovered it while taking a rambling holiday. He and I were old friends, and he was the greatest mineralogist of his day; so I listened to him. Five thousand pounds, he said, would buy the land and sink two shafts.

"I bought the land; I sank the shafts. I spent ten thousand pounds—for nothing; and the major portion of this money was not mine to spend. You understand, Victor? Since then the pit has been widening and deepening; and all I have to show is a blackened disfigured waste of land. I can endure it no longer. And I suppose I shall be called an embezzler! Together we might have weathered the storm, but you have deserted me. My chief creditor is Colonel Mayhew, and my unhappy daughter is engaged to his son.

"How far-reaching is our ruin! I cannot—I dare not face it! To your care I commit your mother and your sister, for this very night I am going—Heaven only knows where! The Colonel has been pressing of late, and I have evaded him as long as I could. It is a terrible ending—terrible—terrible!

"Your disappointed and broken-hearted father,

"JOHN LINTON."

"P.S.—I enclose a map and plans of the mine, and give you full authority to dispose of it for whatever it will fetch. It may realise

something for the creditors. There is no charge upon it, because no one would venture one shilling."

Victor leaned against a tree for support; the shock was almost too much for his nerves. Truly, Harry Mayhew's telegram was explained now! The mine? He anathematised it fiercely; and he nearly destroyed the map with one twitch of the fingers of his right hand.

Already his father might be gazetted a defaulter, and the name of Linton, Son, & Linton—so highly honoured hitherto—might be held up to ridicule and execration. And the police would soon be in full chase of the flying criminal! He thought of his sister Marian, and her lover—Harry Mayhew of the loyal heart.

Then he heard his name uttered, and felt his hand warmly clasped.

"Linton, I was coming to your diggings. Why, whatever ails you, man? You are as white as a corpse!"

"Is it you, Mr. Jarvis?" Victor said feebly.

"Why, of course it is! You ought to see a doctor. Surely you are not subject to heart-troubles—a great strapping fellow like you? I heard from Miss Lewis of your return to Llanberis, and called at eight o'clock at your lodgings, but you were not up—went to roost very late, the landlady informed me. I wanted to be the first to break the good news to you—good news, do you hear? Miss Carrington does not dream that you are back in Llanberis, or she would have been here to meet you, I'll go bail!" He looked into the young man's face. "Yes—that is the passing-bell. Sir John is dead, and the flags are at half-mast, but you will hear the particulars later." He linked his arm in Victor's. "You will go to the Castle at once?"

"I don't know. I was coming to see you when I received a letter and telegram from home containing dreadful news! It—it——" He could not go on.

The Rector looked anxious.

"It must have been an awful shock to upset you like that!"

"It is ruin and disgrace—for my mother and my sister as well as for me. You will read about it in the papers soon, sir! My father has absconded; he has been speculating with trust-funds, or something very like it. The name of Linton will be—— I can't stand it!"

A sob burst from his lips.

"I am both grieved and amazed, Linton. Your father was always a man of iron—why did he not face it out? You might have helped him."

"That is just what he reproaches me with! But I had not the faintest knowledge of his financial position; and in any event I could not have been a party to the—the fraud."

It was a bitter word to use.

"I don't mean in that way." The Rector hesitated for a moment. "I mean that you could have borrowed the money. Miss Carrington is wealthy now."

Victor's eyes flashed.

"Pray don't suggest such a thing—I could never have entertained it! Indeed I fear that my little romance is ended for good and all." He spoke sadly but firmly. "You see, my marriage was but a dream; and I was so happy, so hopeful yesterday! You have nothing more to tell me, Mr. Jarvis?" They were standing at the gate of the Rectory.

"My dear fellow, I had a great deal to tell you, but you must hear it from Miss Carrington's own lips! Go to her at once. And let us hope that your father's affairs are not in the muddle you anticipate; and, if you return to London this evening, you must let me know the best and the worst."

"You will probably get a full account of that in your newspaper," Victor said bitterly. "Yes—I will go and see Hilda. Good morning, sir! I shall remember your kindness as long as I live."

Still in a half-dazed state, the young man walked back to the village to order a conveyance to take him to Woodcroft Castle. There was no time to be lost. People watched him curiously, but he was not aware of it. Some of the shopkeepers had put up a black shutter, reserved for such solemn occasions, but the majority had no respect for the dead Sir John.

Victor ordered his conveyance, and then went to the post-office to send an answer to Harry Mayhew's telegram. It ran—

"I know all. Shall be home to-night."

He directed it to his mother's address in Euston Square.

"I wonder what the end will be?" he thought, as he returned to the inn at which he had ordered the carriage. "If I could but look into the

future—even one small year ahead! When the crash comes I must take mother and Marian away where no one knows them. What a fearful business—my father's crime has perhaps ruined the lives of four young people! There must be no mistaken notions of chivalry upon Mayhew's part. Poor old Harry!"

As the fly drew up the driver touched his hat deferentially. The young lawyer from London was a man of importance now; he was the *fiancé* of Miss Carrington of Woodcroft Castle.

CHAPTER XI.

NEITHER the splendour of the morning nor the beauty of the Welsh scenery found favour in Victor Linton's eyes. They glowed with a strange fire, a hopeless sort of yearning, and his face was ever turned towards the gray towers of Ogof Llech.

He had said that Hilda Carrington's sudden accession to wealth was an unfortunate interruption to their romantic happiness, and he realised it now with redoubled force. If the art of the necromancer had been employed she could not have been more completely removed from his lowly sphere. One touch of the magic wand and the peasant maid had become a princess!

The fly rolled over the bridge that spanned the moat and entered the courtyard. Several handsome carriages were moving in the spacious square. Messengers were hurrying to and fro, and liveried servants lolled in the great vestibule.

Victor heard a dull flapping sound, and looked up. A great flag at half-mast on the main tower sailed loosely in the wind.

A servant had opened the door of the carriage, and the butler was gravely waiting in the entrance-hall.

He glanced at Victor's card, and his faintly supercilious manner changed to one of mingled interest and respect. He showed Linton into a reception-room and left him.

Victor paced the soft carpet, his heart cold and dead within him. There was a strange persistent buzzing in his ears. The joy and hopefulness of youth were gone, and he felt as a man who is prematurely aged from the weight of a great burden.

He did not hear the door open or know that Hilda was near him until a quick impulsive hand was laid upon his arm and her voice was speaking to him words of surprise and welcome.

"Victor—Victor, I am so glad that you have come to me! I am utterly helpless in all this confusion. You read about my uncle's death in the papers, and that he sent for me at the last?"

"Not a word, Hilda; I do not dare to look at a newspaper! I returned to Llanberis last night very late, and I heard that my sweetheart was gone."

His eyes were fixed yearningly on her pale face.

"How strangely you act and speak, Victor! Take me in your arms as you did when we parted only a little while ago, and kiss me—kiss me!"

He drew her to his breast almost despairingly.

"I will, even if it be for the last time," he thought.

"Now I have so much to tell you, Victor. And I have given orders that we are not to be interrupted. Sit here, and I will sit beside you."

Again he obeyed her as if under a spell, and Hilda related how Sir John had relented towards her on the day of his death. She told him the reason, not sparing her father in the smallest degree.

"My uncle must have been a very great man at some period in his life," Hilda continued; "for notable personages are calling, and scores of telegrams have already arrived from all parts of the country. I can't think how the report has got into the papers so soon—I mean about myself, and my being with him all alone at the last."

Her tears fell fast, and still Victor made no reply. She nestled closer to him, laying her head upon his shoulder.

"And, now that you have come, I feel stronger and braver. I need you to advise and guide me. The family lawyer has kindly undertaken to meet the callers, but he bothers me with questions, and I should like to hide myself away from it all. You are unhappy, Victor—I can see it in your eyes! Are you sorry that I am no longer the shabby schoolgirl?"

"Not for your sake, Hilda, but for my own," he answered slowly.

She started erect in a moment.

"What do you mean, Victor?"

"I mean that there is an impassable gulf between us now, Miss Carrington."

"You professed to love me!" she said, with a flash of scorn in her eyes. "You saved me from misery—from myself; I have set you upon a pedestal and made a hero of you!" Her voice faltered. "And you would let this come between us? Is that your love?"

He clutched at the letter in his pocket.

"Would you share my infamy and poverty?" he asked.

She kissed his trembling hand.

"Infamy and poverty? I would share anything with you, my own—I would sacrifice anything for you! Remember that we were to have been married this week or next! I have no desire for the ceremony to be postponed. My uncle spoke of the pleasure it gave him; his latest wish was that my lover should be my husband and the master of Woodcroft without delay—to protect me from my father, whom he hated and distrusted."

"But public opinion, Hilda!" Victor was grasping his father's letter.

"Public opinion is nothing to me compared with my future happiness! Public opinion scoffed at the beggar-maid when it condescended to interest itself in her. I have already expressed my views to the Rector, and arranged that nothing shall interfere with a quiet marriage—absolutely nothing! It may be postponed for a week, but not longer, my darling!"

She clung to him frantically; he was amazed at her passion.

A long silence followed; at last Hilda murmured—

"You will not try to oppose my wishes, Victor? You love the princess as you loved the beggar-maid? Or did you only pity her forlornness?"

The question was half serious, half playful, and Linton spread out his father's letter before her.

"My Hilda, if I loved you then, I love you now a hundredfold more! While Fortune has been smiling upon you she has been buffeting me and mine without mercy. Yesterday I bore an honourable name; to-day it is smirched with infamy. If you read this you will understand and be able to judge. In any event I must go home to-night to my mother and sister, and afterwards——"

He did not complete the sentence, but watched Hilda's pale face while she read the confession of Mr. Linton's criminal folly. Then she looked at the map, her face lighted up with keen pleasure and interest.

"Victor," she said softly, "in what way did you imagine that this would influence me? The fault is not yours, but I am sorry—so sorry—for your mother and sister! Is it too late——"

"For what?" He turned his haggard eyes upon her apprehensively. Was she going to offer him money? It had been the first thought of the Rector.

"You understand your father's business. His flight need not be known perhaps for some time; and, if the work in the office goes on without interruption, your name might not suffer. It is only a woman's suggestion." She hesitated.

"Thank you, but I am afraid to hope! If there is a chance, our managing clerk will not let it slip. I will telegraph to him." He rose as if to go. "Yes, Hilda, I will do all that you suggest, and my own poor little ambition must go to the wall!" He laughed bitterly. "The story that was to make my name and fortune has become a pitiful thing—and yesterday I was so full of hope and happiness!" He saw that his words pained her, and continued remorsefully. "What a brave and loyal soul you are; and I had no idea until now that I was so wretched a coward!"

She held the map of the ill-fated mine towards him, her face lighting up.

"Victor, there may be something in this after all. I have seen the place—it is barely ten miles from Llanberis—and I have been very angry with the people who had the heart to turn the beautiful fields into mounds of charred and blackened earth; to me it seemed an act of Vandalism. Oh, yes, I know the Nant Glaslyn Valley very well indeed, and it is possible that the mine of wealth your father dreamed of really exists below the surface!"

He bent down and kissed her lips with infinite tenderness, murmuring gently—

"Little comforter!"

"Ah, you think that I am only a foolish girl!" she answered brightly, although there was a shadow beneath her eyes. "And now, my darling, it is 'Good-bye' for a little while! If I had not plenty to do, I think that my heart would break." She laughed hysterically. "And you will write to me every day, and come back to me before my uncle's funeral if you can? It seems that the house will be full of people—the lawyer says so—and I have to get a maid and a chaperon! Oh, I wish that I had never had an uncle, or that he had let me go on in my own way!"

Victor made all sorts of promises. His face wore an expression that was almost cheerful when he quitted the Castle.

"Things may not be so black as I painted them after all," he thought. "How could I ever have doubted Hilda's noble and unselfish heart? And her last words were hopeful words concerning that treacherous mine."

He shook his head sadly. Then he became conscious that the butler was regarding him inquisitively. Where had he seen the man before?

He entered the waiting fly, and was driven to Llanberis. At the station he telegraphed to the managing clerk of Linton, Son, & Linton. There was a grain of hope there also.

And when he was seated in the train he made a careful study of the map of the mine in Nant Glaslyn Valley.

CHAPTER XII.

THE funeral and other arrangements were in the hands of the late Baronet's lawyer, a remarkably astute man, who numbered among his extensive *clientèle* many members of the peerage, and was something of an aristocrat himself. His name was Molson, and he was the brother of an eminent judge.

Mr. Molson had promptly adopted the *rôle* of protector and adviser to the girlish mistress of Woodcroft, and Hilda had accepted his good offices with cheerful thankfulness, though the lawyer was not animated by any philanthropic sentiments. He wished to retain the business management of Woodcroft Castle in its entirety as heretofore—hence his desire to propitiate the new owner in every possible way. And she was only an ignorant schoolgirl!

"It is an open secret, my dear Miss Carrington, that every acre—every shilling—is yours, before waiting for the will to be read, and Sir John extracted a promise from me to regard your interests as my own until you fully realised the grave responsibility of your new position. You see I have been Sir John's legal adviser for many years, and we were comrades as boys. Therefore I do not anticipate that you will negative any action or proposal of mine."

"Oh, no!" Hilda flushed at the idea. "I am utterly helpless in matters of this kind."

"Then I have *carte blanche?* I considered it due to you to speak plainly; though, after the lapse of two whole days since Sir John's unfortunate demise, little more remains to be done until the body is laid to rest." He coughed behind his hand, and began to pace the room, apparently studying the pattern of the carpet. "And there are one or two other matters about which I wish to speak, Miss Carrington."

Hilda waited.

"I have been obliged, as a matter of courtesy, to send out a large number of invitations to the funeral—which is fixed for next Monday,

by the way. You see, Sir John had so many old colleagues in the political and official world, whose admiration and affection have been revived by the news of his sudden death."

He glanced at the girl's impassive face, and smiled faintly, continuing—

"And, as regards the lady whom I recommended to act in the capacity of chaperon for as long a period as you shall decide, I have a letter stating that she will arrive at Woodcroft during the day. The matter was so urgent that we have not really had time to pick and choose, though I can thoroughly recommend Mrs. Staples-Lambert—who, by the way, is of very good family. She is a widow in poor circumstances, but experienced in the ways of the world. You may place yourself unreservedly in her hands, Miss Carrington."

The lawyer paused interrogatively, and Hilda said "Thank you!" in a weary voice.

"I am glad that you approve so heartily of my action," proceeded Mr. Molson, his eyes again becoming fixed on the carpet. "A few more words and I have done. I desire to refer to Mr. Linton, the—er—father of the gentleman whom I saw here two days ago."

Hilda paled and reddened by turns; her head was erect, and her eyes flashed.

"I don't think that anything you can have to say about Mr. Linton will interest me," she answered coldly.

"On the other hand, my dear Miss Carrington, I know that my information will interest you. It has reached me from a private but most reliable source that there is likely to be some scandal in connection with the firm of Linton, Son, & Linton, though your—er—friend, the son, is doing his best to hush it up. The father is supposed to be ill at home, but has in reality gone to the Continent——"

"This does not affect me in the least!" interrupted Hilda haughtily. "Will you be so good as not to refer to it again, Mr. Molson?"

The lawyer looked up in a puzzled way. Had she already given young Linton his *congé*? He was clearly a detrimental now.

"You have finished?" asked Hilda, rising. "Thank you! I have other things to see to."

He noted the glitter in her eyes, the firmly-set mouth and haughty poise of the head.

"What I have said was prompted by the best of motives," began Mr. Molson.

"Apologies are needless!"

Hilda swept out of the room without so much as glancing at the lawyer.

"I have made an enemy of that girl!" Mr. Molson thought. "Little spitfire!"

An hour after this incident the London post came in, and Hilda laughed and cried over a letter which it brought to her. Thus it ran—

"My Darling Sweetheart—The news I have to send is not altogether bad news. My unhappy father has absconded, it is true, but the facts will be known to only a very few persons. Our managing clerk will take over the business as it stands, and, with the aid of a partner, will pay off the small liabilities—a matter of about a thousand pounds. I have arranged this satisfactorily; and the most serious side of affairs has practically arranged itself, though I shall always consider myself under an obligation to liquidate the debt in order to restore the honour of my family.

"Our chief creditor—the creditor whose money my father has used for his own purposes—is Colonel Mayhew, whose son is engaged to my sister, Marian. You have heard me speak often of Harry Mayhew—dear old Harry, the most loyal-hearted, noble-souled fellow in all the world! The moment the evil news reached him, he hurried to the assistance of my mother and sister, and, in defiance of his father, obtained a special licence, and Marian and he were married this morning. Thus a prosecution by Colonel Mayhew has been rendered well-nigh impossible, and what appeared to be an inevitable scandal has been averted. The Colonel cannot imprison the father of his son's wife, though he has washed his hands of his son, whose entire income amounts to only two hundred a year. Nothing remains to my mother except the household furniture at Euston Square, so Harry and his bride will probably reside with her, and they are confident of perfect happiness.

"Sweetheart, my position financially is even worse than when I left you; for I am morally—nay, legally—responsible to Colonel Mayhew for a very large sum of money—nearly twelve thousand pounds! And in addition, I must help my mother. In such circumstances as these

our wedding must be postponed indefinitely. You would not have me sacrifice my self-respect; and I must work—work until the burden is cast aside. But I will come and live very near to you, where I can see you every day, and you shall be my constant inspiration! Do you know that I have had all sorts of wild dreams about the discarded mine? But I must put them away from me—they are the foolish fancies of an over-sanguine temperament—and settle down to the solid facts of life.

"I am returning to Llanberis almost at once, so that I may be present at the funeral of Sir John. . . . My darling Hilda, it will be so much easier to talk these matters over together, and I think that I have a great deal to be thankful for. At any rate, my name will not be dragged through the mire by unfeeling newspaper-men. . . . Dear one, I was so worried when I saw you last time that I forgot to give you the engagement-ring I had bought for you! I am therefore sending it with this letter. "Your lover, "VICTOR."

Hilda clasped the letter to her breast with a little sob, then took from the envelope a tiny card-board box in which was secreted the precious ring. She removed the lid and it was revealed—a broad gold band in which was set a little ruby heart.

Hilda pressed it fondly to her lips, and then slipped it on to her finger, murmuring passionately—

"There it remains until death! Oh, my brave generous Victor, who defied all for my sake when I was poor and friendless—who taught me the meaning of love!" She sobbed again. "The world was like a dark waste of waters until you came into my life."

For a long space the girl sat in silence, dreaming, dreaming. And her dreams were of the future with the man she loved. How could she help him, and destroy the barrier of pride which he had raised between them? The coal-mine might be worthless still, and it had already absorbed many thousands of pounds.

Between three and four o'clock that afternoon Mrs. Staples-Lambert arrived at the Castle. She was an imposing-looking person, with an authoritative air and a decidedly loud manner for a lady of such pedigree.

Mr. Molson was careful to waylay her immediately. They shook hands cordially.

"I have to thank you for your very kind recommendation," Mrs. Staples-Lambert began. "I suppose that I may consider myself engaged? Miss Carrington is a mere child, you say—both simple and ignorant—just out of a second-rate school? Well, I like to have my own way."

The lawyer waved his hand.

"I did write something to that effect, but I had had no opportunity of studying the girl's character then. If I may venture to say anything, I must warn you to be most discreet with Miss Carrington; she has a temper of her own, and if you scratch her delicate skin the tiger-cat appears. She is expecting you."

"I am not likely to quarrel with my bread-and-butter!" And Mrs. Staples-Lambert smiled.

The lawyer nodded. "I will send the housekeeper to take you to your room," he said. "We shall meet again at dinner."

Half an hour later Mrs. Staples-Lambert was introduced to Miss Carrington. The chaperon opened the conversation in her most gushing manner; Hilda however treated her with cool indifference.

"Your mourning is being made here? I suppose you could not very well do otherwise upon such short notice, and with no one at hand to assist you. Now I will take every care from your shoulders; and I hope that you will like me very soon! I nearly always get on well with young people."

As Hilda eyed her with a critical stare, Mrs. Staples-Lambert felt quite angry with herself for being disconcerted by a mere schoolgirl.

"No," Hilda answered to one of the chaperon's suggestions—"I have no intention of travelling or leaving Woodcroft at all. If I must have London-made costumes—well, the makers of such things must come to me. As for a maid, for the present I can do without one. I have no wish to be needlessly bothered, Mrs. Staples-Lambert."

"What airs!" thought the chaperon. "The pert little minx—I positively dislike her! But her money is not to be despised! And the horror of that dreadful story about a penniless young scribbler coming to lord it here! The girl is clearly out of her mind. Why, she might marry a title! Her face is not pretty, but she has a good figure."

So the days passed, and everybody in Woodcroft Castle became insensibly convinced that the young mistress would rule for herself.

It was the eve of Sir John's funeral. Hilda was wandering alone in the Castle grounds gazing dreamily about her. The lake wherein the body of the ill-fated Lady Mary Idwal had been discovered had attracted her fancy. It was a gruesome spot, and there was a belief among the dependants that no bird was ever seen to fly across the dark waters. Beyond the lake was a ruined tower, the remains of an ancient chapel. The wind whispered mournfully in the trees, and a pale moon was rising over the hills. Behind her the lights in the windows of the Castle began to gleam; there was scarcely a ripple on the face of the sullen pool. Suddenly Hilda was chilled to the very marrow in her bones. A low weird song fell upon her ears, and beneath the ivy-covered walls of the ruined tower a gray shadow in trailing garments hovered for a moment, then vanished into thin air.

Hilda endeavoured to speak, but her tongue refused its office. Fascinated, she gazed at the spot where she had seen the shadow. The ivy rustled in the evening breeze which swept over the lake with a mournful sound.

Gathering her skirts together, the girl turned and fled back to the Castle. Her nerves were completely unstrung.

In the open she encountered the butler, who so far forgot himself as to stare curiously at his mistress.

"A telegram for you, Miss Carrington," he said, lowering his eyes. "It arrived half an hour ago, but I have only just succeeded in finding you."

Hilda calmly took the envelope, and dismissed the man with a gesture; then she thrust the telegram into the pocket of her dress, and hastened to her own room.

A feeling of dread had taken possession of her. Had she really seen a wraith at the ruined tower? And did its appearance portend some evil to herself or to the man she loved? The legend ran that way—or in something very like it.

She opened the envelope, and read the message contained therein with wildly-staring eyes and throbbing heart.

"Only received news of my dear brother's death to-day. Mrs. Carrington and I will be with you to-morrow. "VANE CARRINGTON."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE next morning opened stormily. The bright blue skies and brilliant sunshine were gone, and a fierce wind swept up the gorge, while a savage slanting rain pelted the windows unceasingly.

Hilda was an early riser from long habit, and was down-stairs in the gray of the morning. Her face was pale, and there was a tired anxious look in her dark eyes. Oh, how glad she would be when this day was ended, the meeting with her father over, and the people all gone! But in all the gloomy waste there was one bright spot—Victor would be there!

The servants were lighting fires in the reception-rooms, and, enveloping herself in a waterproof cloak, Hilda went out of doors. She was no dainty tender lady who feared rain and wind, but a strong resolute young woman, hardened by a life of privation and toil. And to her it was a positive delight to be buffeted by the storm, to hear the rain beating down upon her covered head, to feel the cold drops on her face.

She passed through the courtyard to the lawns and terraces beyond, and the servants saw her and wondered. The morning was still gray, and everything looked blurred and misty through the rain. The lake and the old tower lay to the east of the Castle, nearly a quarter of a mile away, and were reached by a narrow winding path overhung by sombre trees. Here the undergrowth had been permitted to grow and spread unchecked for many years, originally in obedience to the orders of the dead Baronet. It was regarded as an uncanny spot.

"I was frightened last night," Hilda thought a little contemptuously of herself—"frightened by a mere fancy! But it is a dreadful place! I will have the path cleared and half the trees cut down. If only the sun could shine through sometimes, this depressing atmosphere would vanish. It raises thoughts of murder! There is no gleam in the water; the lake shall be filled in and turned into a garden of flowers!" She was growing hysterical, but controlled herself by a great effort. "No wonder that the birds never come here!"

She entered the Castle by a side-door; the butler was there to receive her, his face inscrutable. He took the dripping cloak away, while the girl smoothed back her hair and wiped the rain-drops from her brow. There was not much harm done—but her shoes!

"I suppose I must change them," she thought; "I don't want to get cold!" She turned to the butler, who was at her side again. "What is your name?" she demanded suddenly.

"Bartlet," he replied respectfully.

"Yes—I had forgotten. Is the lake very deep?" she added, half turning away.

The butler was visibly disturbed.

"Yes, Miss Carrington—very deep and very dangerous. I have heard my late master say that there is fifteen feet of water."

"Thank you, Bartlet!"

She turned away quickly, and the butler watched her curiously.

"I don't like her," he murmured—"I can't like her! And yet I promised Sir John——"

The clanging of a bell scattered his reflections. With the house full of guests he had little leisure, and he frowned.

"It was my master's wish that everything should be done quietly," he grumbled to himself. "And here we've got no end of great people and members of Parliament kicking up a fuss. All the work of that lawyer, who is on the look-out for fees! I wish the young mistress had put her foot down a bit harder!"

Hilda decided to breakfast alone in her own room, and repulsed, almost rudely, the blandishments of her chaperon, who informed her that a few of the late Baronet's friends desired an introduction.

"Noblemen, my dear—and statesmen!"

"I have no desire to know them individually. My window commands an excellent view of the centre drive, and I prefer to remain here, as I am expecting friends of my own."

"Certainly, if you wish it!" Mrs. Staples-Lambert made an ugly *moue* behind the girl's back. "I have only conveyed the desires of Mr. Molson."

"I have no intention of coming down-stairs until all the fuss is over," Hilda proceeded calmly.

"But the reading of the will, dear Miss Carrington!"

"It will not be news to me, as my uncle told me its contents; and I decline to be stared at by curiosity-mongers or fortune-seekers. A great many of the people invited have no right to be here at all." She gazed serenely from the window at the scudding clouds. "I believe that the weather will clear before midday. When Mr. Victor Linton arrives I want him to be shown up to my boudoir. You will not forget to tell Bartlet?"

The chaperon stared aghast.

"But, my dear—this day of all days! Will you not take the advice of a woman double your years, a woman of long experience? You have had no opportunities. Dear, dear—I cannot argue! Were you my daughter I should command!" She was almost angry. Hitherto her word had been law to the girl who had been placed in her care.

"But I am not your daughter," smiled Hilda, "and I wish from the bottom of my heart that I was nobody's daughter!"

"What a silly speech!" thought Mrs. Staples-Lambert, as she went in search of Mr. Molson, to acquaint him with the course that the erratic Miss Carrington had resolved to follow.

Even while she was crossing the main hall a carriage drew up, and a gentleman and a lady alighted. The gentleman was soldierly-looking and handsome, though he was well past the meridian of life. The lady was stout, overdressed, and fussy.

"Vane," she said in a high-pitched querulous voice, "see that the footman brings in my wraps without exposing them to the rain! How horrid that there is no covered way on a day like this!"

The man addressed as "Vane" issued his commands in the tone habitual to certain military men when addressing civilians, and the footman flew to do his bidding.

Bartlet stepped forward in his noiseless way and took the gentleman's overcoat and stick, at the same time glancing at him inquiringly.

"I am Captain Carrington; and I suppose that you are expecting me—eh? This place wants managing, I can see! Castle full of people—eh? Take me to a private room, and send my daughter to me! We will have luncheon in half an hour, where we are not likely to be disturbed."

Bartlet gravely conducted Captain and Mrs. Carrington to a small side-room,

"If this will suit your purpose, sir, until your apartments——"

"Apartments?" The Captain uttered an imprecation. "How is it they are not ready? I telegraphed last night! Half you people will be discharged on very short notice! Send my daughter—Miss Carrington—to me at once!"

The butler straightened himself and looked dignified, then slowly retired.

"Mutinous old fool!" muttered Captain Carrington wrathfully. "He leaves to-morrow! My dear, I wish that you would not pant and perspire so much! You look positively vulgar! I must have a drink!"

He walked to a side-board, and was in the act of swallowing half a tumblerful of neat brandy, when Bartlet reappeared.

"Miss Carrington is in her boudoir, sir, and will see you there—alone, if you please." The butler's eyes were lowered.

The Captain choked back his rising wrath.

"Is my daughter indisposed?" he asked, the words trembling on his lips. He turned to his wife. "Remain here; I shall not be gone long. I will soon knock things into shape, even if I risk a scandal. I have not been inquired after or consulted in the slightest degree! The Castle is full of people who occupy the best rooms—my rooms—and make all this fuss about a dead man who would kick out the whole crowd if he could have his way! I telegraph home, and my communication is entirely ignored! And my daughter puts on airs! Now then, you fellow, show me the way to Miss Carrington's boudoir"—he mimicked the word—"and don't you come across me too often!"

"Very good, sir!"

The irate Captain passed Mr. Molson and Mrs. Staples-Lambert in the hall, an ugly scowl on his handsome dissipated face. The servants were amazed.

"Captain Vane Carrington?" remarked the lawyer, just above a whisper. "What unparalleled impertinence! And what a wreck the man has become! Sir John was right; the Captain has been hiding in England somewhere." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, Miss Carrington can take care of herself if it comes to a question of temper!"

He spoke to Bartlet, who was descending the stairs again. The butler's plumage was considerably ruffled.

"The Captain's wife is in the small reception-room, sir; and their luggage must be taken somewhere," he said tentatively.

"You must await Miss Carrington's orders," Mr. Molson answered. "A different Captain Carrington will come down-stairs. He has not seen his daughter since she was a baby."

Another carriage rolled along the drive, and Bartlet went to see that the footmen did their duty.

The new arrival was Victor Linton.

CHAPTER XIV.

Captain Vane Carrington summoned a suave smile to his face when he knocked on the door of his daughter's boudoir. Their first meeting after so many years—he could not remember how many—ought not to be a stormy one. Moreover, Hilda was a child still, and must be treated as such. He was a little curious about her too; she had been so small and so odiously plain in her childhood, and had been inclined to be wilful. And she was wilful still, if the story of her engagement were true. He tapped his breast pocket, wherein was a London newspaper, and smiled scornfully.

A low clear voice bade him enter, and he flushed angrily again. How dared she? It was her duty—her filial duty—to welcome him home. She ought to have opened the door to him gladly, cheerfully, and wept upon his shoulder. The insult recurred to him which she had cast upon his wife—her step-mother—through the medium of a lackey; but it would be unseemly to have any bother upon that day of all days. Let the dead be buried in peace.

He opened the door, and found himself in an ante-room. He remembered it well enough now, and shuddered slightly. These had been the private rooms of Lady Mary Idwal. Then he pushed aside the heavy crimson curtains which screened the room beyond, and saw his daughter.

Hilda was standing almost in the middle of the room, one hand resting on the back of a chair, really for the purpose of steadying herself. Her face was pale, but the dark eyes glowed with an almost sullen fire.

"Good Heaven," her father thought—"she looks five-and-twenty! And what a pretty woman her mother was!"

Hilda waited for him to speak, and he put on his most pleasing smile, as he surveyed her from head to foot and bowed. There was no similarity between them except that they were both tall.

"Is this my little Hilda?" Captain Vane said, holding out his hand.

The girl made no movement to take it, and a dull red flush mounted to his cheeks. With a well-assumed nonchalance, he dropped into a chair, and twisted the ends of his moustache, a perfect volcano of rage within him. "I can hardly realise that you are my daughter," he went on; "and the likeness between you and my poor dear brother is remarkable. Perhaps you do not remember me?"

"Oh, yes!" Her lip curled a little scornfully. She sat down. "I thought what a big brave man you were—then!"

"You got my telegram?"

"Yes."

She said no more, but eyed him steadily.

"What sort of welcome home do you call this?" he demanded at last, his temper getting the better of him. "You confess to having received my telegram, and when I arrive I am positively insulted by my own servants! Your mother is waiting below like a pauper soliciting alms!" He was lashing himself into a rage.

"My mother?" repeated the girl contemptuously. "My mother was a lady, who died of a broken heart. The person of whom you are speaking was your Colonel's cook, I believe, or something of the kind! I remember that she was particularly cruel to me when I was a helpless child; and I shall always hate her for it. Now what is it that you require of me? It can hardly be affection for me, or for the dead man in this house, which has brought you here."

Captain Carrington bounded to his feet, unable to contain himself longer.

"What do I require of you, Miss Insolence? Nothing! And I shall know how to punish you severely for this"—he paused—"this tomfoolery! Why am I here? To claim the heritage which is mine! And you shall ask my pardon and Mrs. Carrington's pardon, or quit Woodcroft Castle for good and all! Probably you have been backed up in this mutinous conduct by that lawyer-lover of yours? The silliness of it passes belief!" He kicked a stool across the room with such fury that it struck a mirror and smashed it. "There must be no unseemly disturbance to-day, but I shall assume the reins of control at once; and the crowd of idiots you have here shall leave to-morrow! I have my own friends to entertain. As for you, I will deal with you later!"

With a bitter sneer, he turned as if about to leave the room. Hilda's flashing eyes and contemptuous laughter constrained him to pause.

"Your heritage?" Again she laughed.

He drew a newspaper from his pocket with a flourish, and pointed to a marked paragraph.

"I should not have been here now had not a friend sent me this. Read it, and you will know how I obtained my information, not only about my brother, but about yourself also."

Hilda took the paper, the strange smile on her lips never fading.

The paragraph announced, with bold head-lines, the very sudden death of Sir John Carrington. His diplomatic career was lightly dwelt upon; but of his recluse-like life in later years and his eccentricities the most was made. There was no doubt that he had been suffering from incipient softening of the brain, and during one of his absurd wild rides he had practically killed himself. He had been selfishly cruel to a niece, the only child of an only brother, who had for years been living in the neighbourhood of Llanberis at a third-rate school. At the last moment however he had sent for the ill-used girl, and she had arrived just in time to see him die. Unfortunately, had he desired to make provision for her, that course was rendered impossible by complete paralysis, and he died intestate.

His brother, being next-of-kin, was heir to the large estates, and it would be interesting to see how long Captain Vane Carrington was in taking possession. No doubt, a certain section of the public would remember that gentleman's unenviable notoriety some years earlier, in connection with a duel on the Continent, which arose out of a quarrel over a professional beauty! Perhaps Captain Carrington would now make amends to the daughter whom he had, to all intents, deserted. Latterly, the young lady had been taking matters into her own hands, and had become engaged to a young lawyer who dabbled in journalism, or a journalist who dabbled in law—it was uncertain which, as he was a success in neither. And there was more to this effect, written in a half-humourous, half-malicious vein.

Hilda's pale cheeks flamed with indignation, while her father regarded her mockingly. Of course, the newspaper had obtained its information upon unimpeachable authority!

"The duel was not about a woman. I will demand an apology, or horsewhip the writer! I am a power in the land now!"

He wheeled round.

"Well, Miss Carrington, are you satisfied? At first, I was inclined to be generous towards you, after dismissing your impertinent lover; but this rebellious spirit of yours must be checked. You have grossly insulted me and Mrs. Carrington; you have—— But we will say no more until the guests are out of the house. The servants will now take their orders from me."

He ceased, a little perplexed by the half-scornful, half-exultant smile on Hilda's face. She eyed him from head to toe pityingly.

"You have called the newspaper scurrilous and irresponsible," she said in cold even tones. "I quite believe you, yet it contains some truths. I was deserted by my father, and I have really engaged myself to a poor man whom I intend to marry at once if he will accede to my wishes."

Carrington rapped out an imprecation, but his daughter's haughty and disdainful glance silenced him.

"In some other things the scurrilous and irresponsible paper has erred grievously. My uncle did not die intestate; and everything that was his is now mine."

Captain Carrington smiled.

"Bah," he answered—"it's untrue! His sudden illness, the attack of paralysis, prevented it. The news is reliable; it was supplied by some one here under this very roof. I was convinced of that."

"You are my father, and, though I cannot like you, I am sorry for you," Hilda said. "I know so much about you that is bad and nothing that is good! You will be present when the will is read, and then perhaps you will be satisfied that I have spoken the truth. There must be no question of authority here—no noise, no scandal; and, if you behave yourself——"

She did not finish the sentence. The demoniacal glare in her father's eyes made her shudder.

"Delightfully kind of you, Miss Carrington!" he retorted. "Oh, believe me, I am completely overwhelmed! Yes, I am your father, and blood is thicker than water, and—— I can't think why I have been

such a fool, to be gulled by some one who is now laughing in his sleeve! I never doubted its truth for a moment—never. But it need not make much difference between us, Hilda. Your fortunes are to a great extent bound up in mine; and you will not see me drown lest you get drawn into the whirlpool yourself! Excuse me, *ma chère*. I must get some brandy; I am shaking like a man with the palsy."

He passed out of his daughter's boudoir just as Victor Linton was announced.

CHAPTER XV.

THE funeral was over and the guests were gone from Woodcroft Castle. The newspapers had a great deal to say about the death of Sir John Carrington, tribute being paid to the genius which had been well-nigh forgotten for nearly a quarter of a century, his sudden end being universally deplored, and brief allusions being made to his "charming and beautiful niece," to whom he had bequeathed every shilling.

When a week had passed Hilda's table was littered with cards, but her mind was too disturbed by other matters to permit her to give a thought to ordinary civilities. The task of receiving callers and replying to letters of condolence devolved upon Mrs. Staples-Lambert, who had become a most obliging and obedient chaperon. She eased her mind however by writing frequently to Mr. Molson; and this is a sample of what she wrote.

"My dear Mr. Molson—Sometimes I feel ready to shake the dust of this place from my feet and fly back to London, but I am deterred by the knowledge that there is little to do, and handsome payment for doing that. But Miss Carrington is certainly an oddity, and I believe that she is determined to marry that young prig of a Linton, whether he likes it or not. Fancy the scandal of it, and Sir John not yet cold in his grave!

"Then there is Captain Carrington stalking about like a villain in a melodrama. He has no defined position in the household yet, and his amiable daughter takes not the slightest notice either of him or of Mrs. Carrington. There will be 'ructions' before very long! However, I cannot afford to quarrel with my bread-and-butter, and what can't be cured must be endured. Society here is not worth much at its best."

Meanwhile, Hilda was becoming acquainted with her dependants, and her likes and dislikes were shaping themselves. For Mrs. Staples-

Lambert and her loudly expressed pretensions she had the most supreme contempt, but the chaperon was useful in many ways if not exactly as a chaperon. The housekeeper, in her rustling silk dress, was a kind motherly woman—nothing more. Mr. Bartlet, the butler, was something of a mystery; but Hilda liked and trusted him nevertheless. Once or twice she had caught him regarding her with an interest that was scarcely in keeping with his position; he had a habit too of appearing in the most unexpected places, but on such occasions was always ready with a plausible excuse.

One beautifully fine morning Hilda strolled in the direction of the lake and the ruined tower, where she had asked her lover to meet her. Victor had been in London for two or three days, and a little note had apprised her of his return to Llanberis. He was hopeful —enthusiastic indeed, having had an interview with a mining expert who was himself a capitalist—and he was coming to tell Hilda the news.

It was warm for October, the sky was cloudless, and there was the peculiar stillness in the air peculiar to the fall of the year. For the first time since her arrival at Woodcroft however, Hilda was conscious of a feeling akin to exhilaration; her heart was lighter, and the blood bounded joyously through her veins, while there was a sparkle in her eyes and a rose-tint in her cheeks.

She walked down to the grass-grown path that wound round the lake. No ray of sunlight entered there. And how still the water was! Now and again a dead leaf fluttered through the silent air and dropped noiselessly upon its surface and remained where it had fallen.

"The trees shall be cut down!" she decided. "Or, better still, the lake shall be drained! I hate it!" She shuddered. "Poor Lady Mary! My uncle believed that her spirit haunted the place; but Victor and I are not likely to be interrupted here, and I want him to explore the tower with me."

A water-rat scuttled past her in the grass, and she repressed a scream. The creature paused at a little distance and watched her with cunning eyes, then plunged into the lake with a loud "plunk," the water eddying, and a few bubbles rising to the surface. Hilda turned away with a feeling of revulsion.

It was half-past ten, and Victor was due at eleven o'clock. She heard a footstep, and the colour came into her face. No—it was not her lover, but the tall dark figure of Bartlet, whose manner and tone were apologetic.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Carrington!" he exclaimed. "I did not know that you were here."

"And what do you want here, Bartlet?" Hilda asked in a tone of annoyance.

He appeared to be confused.

"I have set several traps here, and laid poison about," he answered.

"To catch the ghost?"—her lip curling. "You are an extraordinary servant, Bartlet!"

"To catch the rats, Miss Carrington. They have been allowed their freedom for twenty years or more, and the place literally swarms with them."

"I am sure I ought to be obliged to you, Bartlet! But I am capable of taking care of myself. Catch the rats by all means! But would it not be better to engage a man who does that sort of thing for a living?"

"Perhaps it would," assented the butler. His eyes dropped, and he waited for his dismissal.

Hilda's eyes were fixed upon him in a clear unflinching gaze.

"How long is it since you entered my uncle's service, Bartlet?" she asked suddenly.

He hesitated.

"I ask," she explained, "merely because you haven't the manners or the appearance of a servant. Not that I have had much experience," she added.

Bartlet's countenance changed instantly.

"I have been here several years, Miss Carrington. I was originally Sir John's secretary and valet, but the position became a mere sinecure, and, the butler leaving, I stepped into his shoes. I may add that I enjoyed Sir John's confidence until the last; and he made me promise to see that no harm befell you—if it was in my power to prevent it. Let that be my excuse for having your interests at heart! I was devoted to my master, and I am devoted to my mistress."

Hilda felt rather confused. Was the man speaking the truth? She looked at him apprehensively. He had a good face, keen eyes, and a square-set mouth; he was almost handsome. And his age—was it forty, or fifty, or sixty? It was difficult to tell.

"And that is why you watch me, Bartlet, and poison the rats? I think that I like you; and I am sure that I trust you." She laughed constrainedly. "And now I shall feel that there is always a policeman about the Castle looking out for enemies."

There was the sound of carriage-wheels on the drive, and Bartlet retired, with a swift glance at his young mistress as he went, while a strange smile passed over his face.

When he entered the courtyard a station fly was crawling up to the entrance, and Captain Carrington was standing on the broad white steps, greeting a new-comer. A hand was extended from the open window of the carriage, and Carrington gripped it with a great show of pleasure, though his face was drawn and pale.

"I am delighted, your highness! By Jove, who would have dreamed of such a surprise?"

A couple of footmen obeyed the Captain's signal, the carriage-door swung open, and a tall slight man stepped to the ground with an easy air.

He turned to give some directions about his luggage, and Bartlet saw that he was an Indian of remarkably handsome appearance. As the butler glided forward in his swift noiseless way, Captain Carrington regarded him with a scowl.

"You are never where you are wanted, Bartlet," he said angrily.

"No, sir," the butler responded meekly.

He took the Indian's hat and stick, not a muscle of his face relaxing.

Hilda, listening by the lake, was rather mortified to hear the carriage leaving again, while still there was no sign of Victor. Had he forgotten the appointment?

She was turning to retrace her steps when two hands were placed over her eyes from behind, and a well-loved voice whispered—

"Guess who it is!"

The next moment two arms were about her, and a warm kiss was impressed upon her lips.

"Did I startle you, darling? You are trembling like a leaf. Hang it, what a dolt I am!"

"I am so glad that you are here, Victor. But I am horribly nervous this morning. You came so unexpectedly!"

"And yet you were waiting for me!"

"Yes—I have been waiting for half an hour."

"In this gruesome spot! I would advise you to give it a wide berth; I always associate it with death!"

"And it fascinates me," Hilda said—"I cannot help it! I do not mind, though, when you are with me. Now for the good news!"

The colour returned to the girl's cheeks, and her dark eyes flashed in a way that set the young man's heart throbbing wildly.

"How much you care for me, Hilda!" he said softly. "I never hoped for it so soon. Oh, if this wealth had not come between us, and you were still my naughty little schoolgirl!"

"Nothing can come between us. I liked you as a kind friend then; I love you as a man now, with a love that you cannot understand! If I had my will, and you were not so proud—so stupid—the wedding should take place at once, in defiance of everybody! I have told people so." She blushed vividly, but her eyes never flinched as they met his. "Now for the good news, Victor! The sound of your carriage coming up the drive was music in my ears."

"My carriage? Why, I walked from Llanberis—the morning was so glorious! A fly passed me half a mile away; its occupant was, I think, an Indian. Surely he is not visiting Woodcroft? Perhaps he is one of your father's foreign friends."

Hilda shuddered in spite of herself.

"My father's friends shall not come here!" she said almost fiercely. "And he and Mrs. Carrington must look for another home; I am perfectly agreeable to make them an ample allowance, so long as my father leads a respectable life and keeps out of crime. Mr. Molson has the matter in hand now." She glanced over her shoulder apprehensively. "Ah, Victor, I am terrified at times—I am afraid of my father and his past!"

"And that is one reason why I should take care of my little woman"—twirling his moustache, while his face assumed a serious expression.

"I shall always be near you however until I can honestly claim you for my wife"—they were pacing slowly round the lake—"and, if you want my advice or my assistance at any time, Hilda, I am always ready. Oh, it will not be long—I am convinced of that, because fortune is treading close upon my heels! It is remarkable that any one should become interested in the poor old mine at this moment, and I was somewhat sceptical when I went to my father's office in answer to the letter from Reuben Growcott. I am sure that the finger of Providence is in it all."

Hilda pressed his hand fondly.

"Go on, Victor—I am so interested!"

"Of course I knew the name of Reuben Growcott at once—who does not? But I expected that he wished to experiment while I paid the piper, and that would have been simply impossible. To my utter amazement however, he proposed to buy a half-share in the mine, on the understanding that the money so invested should be utilised in laying down new machinery and re-opening the workings. He named the sum at four or five thousand pounds. It was not his own speculation exactly, but he was acting for a client whose confidence in him was absolute. He had inspected the mine and its surroundings years before, and made the proposal upon hearing of my father's financial difficulties."

"And you accepted at once, Victor?"

"Accepted?" he cried joyously. "I think that I could have embraced Mr. Reuben Growcott! He treated it as a mere matter of business; and he congratulated me upon my future prospects. He was so certain of great results!" Victor hesitated. "Do you know, darling, I think that I might now honourably venture upon marriage—at least, within three months' time. Let us make a new contract, and fix the wedding for the first day of the new year! Meanwhile, we shall have everything in working order, and I shall be half through with my novel."

He drew her hot face nearer to his own, and kissed it fondly.

"I am happier now than I have been for weeks," she said simply.

"And, in our happiness, let us be charitable to others," Victor whispered into her ear. "Do you know, sweetheart, that I am sorry for

your father? And you cannot forget that he is your own flesh and blood. He is, in my estimation, a good-natured reckless fool—weak-minded and vain—but none of us are faultless. He may have been the tool of others. He and I get on capitally together."

"And yet he hates you!"

"Does he? That may be your jealous fancy, darling; you think too much of me and magnify my failings into perfections!"

She shook her head resolutely.

"He ruined my uncle's life—he betrayed him! He caused the death of Lady Mary, whose spirit haunts the lake and the tower. He deserted his own child, and has since lived by robbing others. I can never forget his treatment of me when he believed himself to be the master of Woodcroft. And the people who come here to see him are dreadful-looking men. I am terrified lest something may happen—I am full of vague fears! Do not trust him, Victor; do not listen to his plausible tongue. He and his wife must leave here; I cannot bear to breathe the same air as they do. Ah, if you were injured, I should kill him!"

Linton was amazed and perplexed. The girl's hands were clenched, her eyes flashed, her face was deathly pale.

"Hilda, my dear one, you must not talk so! Foolish fears! What harm can your father or any one else do me? Why on earth should they harm me?" He laughed encouragingly.

"Because you love me! Oh, it is reason enough for them! If you were out of the way, they would try to make me marry one of my father's friends—such horrors, they look like convicts!"

She broke off hysterically, and Victor clasped her tightly to his heart.

"You are growing morbid, little woman! It is all the fault of this cheerless spot and its associations! Lady Mary Idwal may have killed herself here, but the idea of her ghost is all nonsense!"

"I have seen it," answered Hilda.

"You see," he went on, "that the hills shut out the light on one side, and on the other the trees have become dense. It is all owing to neglect; the paths are deep in weeds and grass. If all this were cleared away, and the trees were thinned out, there would be no more ghosts, I'll be bound!"

They were standing under the ruined tower, and Hilda pointed to the crumbling archway.

"I should like to go in, but I have been afraid to do so alone."

"By all means let us beard the ghost in its den!" laughed Victor.

He beat down the tall grass with his stick, and two or three rats scuttled away. He seized a piece of fallen masonry to hurl after them, and a lizard darted from under it.

"Bah—a horrid place! Take my hand; I have not acted wisely in bringing you here."

They entered, and stood within the ruined walls of what had once been the chapel. A spiral stairway led to the upper chambers of the tower; but, as it was in complete darkness, Victor considered it wise to defer the exploration.

"It may be historically interesting," he said, "but it is very filthy, gruesome, and dangerous, and would be best demolished. The place is an ugly blot upon a beautiful scene."

He noticed a large iron ring in the floor, and discovered that there was either a vault or a well right under their feet.

"Come, Hilda! How foul the air is here!"

They both gladly sought the freshness and sweetness of the atmosphere outside, and neither of them spoke again until they had reached the lawns in view of the Castle windows.

"You have not yet told me about your sister Marian," Hilda said at last. "I hope that she is happy?"

"How could a bride of less than a month be otherwise? She is one of the best of women; and her husband is the noblest fellow on earth!" His brow clouded. "Of course my mother is naturally troubled; we are trying however to communicate with father. Now I intend lunching with you, if you will have me. Mr. Growcott is coming to Llanberis to-night with his engineer; and in a week or two things will be in working order."

The lovers entered the Castle by a postern-door, and walked together to a small room which had been Sir John's study.

Close upon their heels came Bartlet, and a keen observer would have seen that it cost him a strong effort to suppress his excitement;

He glanced sharply at Victor Linton, then addressed his young mistress.

"Captain Carrington would like to see you, Miss Carrington, in the south reception-room." He paused, before adding impressively, "He wishes to introduce His Highness the Rajah of—Nowhere!"

Linton looked up quickly, but Bartlet was gone.

"Your butler is a privileged person, I should imagine, Hilda—and an oddity at that!" he remarked. "Are you going at once? Then I will go with you!"

CHAPTER XVI.

From the lips of Bartlet, Captain Carrington's message to his daughter had sounded almost like a command, and, in ordinary circumstances, the butler's demeanour would have merited a severe reprimand.

Victor Linton was puzzled, and he glanced in an inquiring manner at Hilda.

"We will meet the Rajah of Nowhere," she said quietly, but with a curl of the lip. "And my father shall understand that in future he must not invite his disreputable friends to Woodcroft Castle. Mr. Molson has been instructed as to what I am prepared to do for Captain and Mrs. Carrington; and the lawyer never questions my will now—indeed he has become my firm friend and ally." She laughed lightly. "We were at daggers drawn for the first few days of our acquaintance."

"And what of the butler?" Victor pursued. "Familiarity in servants cannot be tolerated!" He paused. "I have had an uncomfortable feeling regarding that man from the first moment I saw him."

"In what way?"

"I seem to have known him somewhere else and under different circumstances. You see lawyers knock about a great deal."

"It is hardly possible, Victor. Bartlet has not always been engaged in the capacity of a butler, but he has been at Woodcroft for years, and was a trusted servant of my uncle's—a sort of valet and secretary combined. I know that he is carefully watching over my interests."

"Ah!" Victor murmured, doubtful and dissatisfied.

They went to the reception-room, where Captain Carrington was waiting with his guest, and the Captain's face flushed from annoyance at sight of Victor Linton. The Captain was standing on the hearth-rug, trying to roll a cigarette.

In the embrasure of a large window a young man was seated, smoking contentedly as he gazed at the glorious country beyond. He had not heard Miss Carrington enter the room.

"What an unlucky fellow you are, Captain!" he remarked, in perfect English. "And what a shame we were so cruelly hoaxed by the newspaper reports! Fancy all this magnificent property being governed by a girl! You must have played your cards badly with your brother; but you always were a fool as well as a knave, and it is a hopeless case when the two go together."

The Captain kicked over the fire-irons, making a terrific clatter, and the Indian lazily turned his head.

In an instant he was on his feet, and advanced to the centre of the room, bowing gracefully.

"My daughter, Miss Hilda Carrington," said the Captain, nearly collapsing. "Hilda, my dear, this is Prince Ali Narain—a great rajah in his own country." He laughed a little foolishly. "And he, being a very great friend of mine, I want you two to be friends also. And—eh? Oh, Linton, I beg your pardon! This is Mr. Victor Linton."

Hilda saw standing before her a tall graceful man, with a singularly handsome dark face and piercing black eyes. There was no mistaking his nationality. A row of gleaming white teeth showed under his silky black moustache. He murmured something in softly-modulated tones. Was this the man whose voice had so lately rung so coarsely through the room?

"I am delighted to meet you, Miss Carrington!" He held out a shapely hand, upon which glittered a curiously-wrought gold ring studded with stones. To the mind of the Oriental this was evidently no formal introduction of two strangers one to the other, but the introduction of two lives which in all the future might be inseparable.

Hilda did not touch the proffered hand, but merely bowed.

Victor Linton had sauntered to the other side of the room, after slightly inclining his head in the direction of Ali Narain. The Oriental's very presence had filled him with disgust. He felt ill at ease too on Hilda's account. Why did she listen to the smooth hateful tones or remain within range of the snake-like eyes? Every movement of the Rajah reminded him of a snake.

"My dear Linton," Captain Carrington said, aside—he had recently made a point of treating Victor with an admirable show of affection—"the prince and I were comrades in Bombay some twelve or fourteen years ago, though of course he is a much younger man than I am! When you get to know a thoroughly good man of his race and creed it is surprising how solid the friendship is! I hope that you will like him for the sake of the general amity!"

"I never could like a—an Indian!" muttered Victor.

Captain Carrington flashed a sinister glance at the young man, but he answered suavely—

"Don't let him suspect it! Ah, you are a true untravelled Britisher—he believes all foreigners to be inferior creatures to himself—but you are too much of a gentleman to be rude to a guest of mine!" He spoke almost appealingly, and his lips twitched.

"Your guest must not look at Hilda in that way," said Victor.

Captain Carrington was startled, but he changed the topic of conversation, though his thoughts were still centred upon the Rajah and his daughter.

"I am hoping for your unbounded success, Linton—as regards the re-opening of the old mine, I mean. Of course the story is getting ventilated. These things come out—one never knows how. But isn't it rather a risky speculation? I must confess to a great amount of interest in the result, and you must promise to let me go down into the mine when your machinery is ready for operations."

Victor readily gave the desired promise. He did not dislike Captain Vane Carrington, regarding him as a man who had perhaps been more sinned against than sinning. He was vain, weak, good-natured, and pleasure-loving; but he was Hilda's father. It was hard on him, no doubt, to be thrust out of his expected inheritance, and the young man was ready to pity him. Captain Carrington was not slow to observe this, and to play upon the sympathetic nature of one whom it was not in his power to prevent becoming the master of Woodcroft Castle as the husband of his self-willed daughter. In his heart he sincerely hoped that the mines would end in disastrous failure, or that Linton would break his neck—unless he could use him to some advantage.

These thoughts were running through his mind now, and he glanced slyly at Victor.

"The Rajah wants to see an English conservatory; and Hilda cannot decline to humour him. See—they are going, and we will follow at a short distance!"

Victor rose at once.

"Hilda is a remarkable girl!" the Captain said, as he walked slowly along with Victor. "She is amusing herself with the poor Rajah—just 'sizing him up,' as it were! I want to make him feel at home for a day or two, as he afforded me asylum when I was literally on my uppers." He sighed dismally. "Unfortunately, perhaps, you heard the Rajah giving utterance to honest sentiments when you entered the room? He is always like that—says the most brutal things, just as they flash into his mind. He had read the account of my poor brother's death, and that I was the legal master of Woodcroft Castle, and I had just undeceived him."

"Yes—I heard your Rajah call you a knave and a fool," said Victor pointedly.

The Captain flushed.

"I don't suppose that he realises the true meaning of the word 'knave'—foreigners mix up our language so! Had an Englishman applied such a term to me, I should have knocked him down. But I know Prince Ali Narain better than he knows himself."

Victor was only half convinced. His eyes, with a fierce expression in them, were following every movement of the Indian's.

"I said that Hilda was a remarkable girl," proceeded the Captain dolefully; "and I must add, even at the risk of offending you, that she is a most revengeful one too. I have done my best for her, Heaven knows, and she owes everything to me for sending her to Llanberis. I knew Sir John well enough to anticipate the end. However, my daughter persists in the belief that I wilfully deserted her. And I am sure that she hates me in that implacable way of hers."

Victor indicated by a deprecatory movement that he could not listen to any disparagement of Hilda, even from the lips of her disappointed father.

"Don't speak against her," he said—"it makes my ears tingle; and

I don't want to quarrel with you, because I am beginning to like you in a way."

A swift light came into the Captain's eyes.

"Linton," he said, with feeling, "I am proud to hear you say so! It is something to have a friend in my anomalous position! The people here avoid me simply because I am not my brother's heir! I don't profess that I am a saint, or that my past has been altogether clean; I always was a—a careless sort of fellow; but here comes the rub—Hilda has coolly informed me that I shall have to get out at short order, and that she will make suitable provision for me! Surely there is room enough for me and Mrs. Carrington in this vast place? I should take a great delight in managing the estate. There would then be no need to employ an expensive steward, and Mrs. Carrington and I could relieve you and Hilda—presuming that you will soon be married—of a vast amount of responsibility, while you travelled."

Victor was silent until his companion faced round.

"Captain Carrington, why do you say this to me?"

"Because you have more influence than anybody else over my daughter, because you will be her husband soon, and because I don't want to be driven away from Woodcroft Castle!"

"I really cannot interfere, sir!"

"Do you mean that you will not?"

"If you put it in that way! I love Hilda too much to attempt to cross her wishes. Besides, I have no voice in this matter, even were I opposed to Hilda's decision," he said lamely.

The Captain was bitterly disappointed.

"And you think that it will be for the best if my wife and I find a home elsewhere?" he asked in a choking voice.

"I have not thought anything about it, Captain Carrington; and it is rather unkind of you to corner me in this way. I have already told you that my sympathies are with you; but that does not mean that I can interfere in any arrangements that Hilda has seen fit to make. You must remember that this is her home, and her comfort is my primary consideration; I can do absolutely nothing in the way you desire."

Captain Carrington averted his face to hide the anger in his eyes.

"You are right, no doubt, Linton, and I am wrong—I always am;

I never had the least bit of tact—did things at the wrong moment, you know, and consequently was always misunderstood."

He drew a deep breath.

"I'll go into the open air and have a smoke; I see that Hilda is tiring of the Rajah." He opened a door and stepped outside, muttering, "Hang the young prig! What am I to do? Wait—wait—and hear what my—my Rajah has to say!"—finishing with an unpleasant laugh.

CHAPTER XVII.

"AND what do you think of the Rajah?" Hilda asked her lover when they were alone.

The Indian and Captain Carrington were strolling in the grounds.

"Think of him?" asked Victor in tones of genuine disgust. "I did not even speak to him; and I shall know no peace while you are under the same roof as that man! I did not imagine that you would encourage his friendly advances!"

Hilda looked slightly troubled.

"I was both fascinated and repelled—I cannot explain it—but I knew that you were near, so was not afraid." Her lip curled contemptuously. "My father shall be told plainly that Prince Ali Narain is no guest of mine. I cannot help the power that the man may have over him. He has some power—that impression was subtly conveyed to me even while he apologised for his language to my father. It was the way in which they talked to each other—it was mere banter, he explained—they were such old friends, and had been partners in more than one speculation! No doubt I had noticed that Captain Carrington was utterly without business knowledge or tact? And then he showed those white teeth of his, and fixed his blazing eyes upon me."

Victor scowled, and Hilda laughed.

"I had no idea that you could look like that, darling! Until now I have shown all the bad temper."

"Give me permission to kick that black man out of the house!"

"He is my father's friend."

"So he is, and enemy too, or I am greatly mistaken! You must do the hospitable for a day or two; and in the meantime I shall be utterly miserable. Don't let him flirt with you, Hilda—I can't endure the thought that he is even looking at you!"

"Flirt with me, Victor?"

The girl's eyes flashed ominously.

"I don't mean that you would give him the slightest encouragement," Linton said hastily; "but these fellows have a bad name for impudent persistency and the employment of all sorts of arts. They stop at nothing to obtain a desired end—not even murder! And, by Jingo, I feel very much like a murderer myself at this moment!"

Hilda drew down his face and fondly kissed his lips.

"Don't be a goose! The Rajah cannot harm me, and by this time to-morrow he will be gone. Besides, I have my chaperon to watch over me. Victor, it is a perfect day for a drive, and there are half a dozen horses in the stables." She looked with a mischievous smile into his troubled face. "And I want so much to have a peep at Nant Glaslyn Valley, wherein all your black diamonds are hidden! Then we can drive on to Carnarvon and lunch there. Oh, it will be simply delightful!"

Victor unbent immediately, and his face brightened.

"You darling—I was afraid to leave you! I am not usually depressed, but the arrival of this black man and—— Forgive me—I have had so much worry lately! Now we will have the whole day to ourselves. I will order the carriage to be at the door, say, in an hour's time."

He walked off whistling towards the stables.

"Nant Glaslyn Valley, where all my black diamonds are hidden!" he thought, with a wild rush of hope. "Oh, if it only be true! And, if it were not, would an expert of Reuben Growcott's standing be ready to risk both money and reputation? My fortunate star must be in the ascendant!"

He walked down to the stables in a leisurely fashion. There was no reason to hurry, for Hilda had gone up-stairs to dress. He saw Captain Carrington and Prince Ali Narain strolling along the drive. The Prince was talking with great animation, and Captain Carrington's head was bent.

Linton turned abruptly into the harness-room, where the stable-hands were usually busy, and ran almost into the arms of Bartlet.

"Hallo," he exclaimed—"you here?"

"I have been watching the two gentlemen from the window here, sir," the butler said quietly. "I think that you understand?" He looked cautiously around; there was no one within ear-shot.

"I don't understand," Linton answered; "but I am sure of one thing, Mr. Bartlet, and that is that we have met before, and that you are sailing under false colours. Some sort of explanation is due to me, I think."

"Perhaps so," the other said thoughtfully.

"Is it safe to say it here?"

"Quite! The men are at dinner, and for a little while there is no fear of interruption, Mr. Linton. Besides, I can say all that is needful in a few minutes."

"Fire away!"

Bartlet was leaning easily against the wall.

"Yes, Mr. Linton," he said, "we have met before, and not so very long since either. It was in London—in your father's office."

Linton stared hard at the man; then a light broke in upon him.

"Tom Perrin, the detective! Your eyes betray you. What on earth are you doing here?" He was strongly agitated. "Miss Carrington says that you are an old servant—that you have been here for some years—first as secretary."

Bartlet smiled.

"No, sir—only three months or thereabouts"—he took a diary from his pocket—"three months and two days."

"Do your fellow-servants know this, or are they new hands?"

"The real Bartlet is in Australia before this, sir. There has been an exchange—that is all. He was Sir John's secretary, and was strongly suspected of tampering with his master's signature and papers. Sir John wanted the matter looked into, and so I was sent down here. Bartlet made a certain confession which implicated Captain Vane Carrington, and he was allowed to go abroad secretly. I took his place—a little dye for the hair, a little stain for the face, and these side-whiskers did the trick! Bartlet had never associated with the servants, and they suspected nothing. I intended to tell you from the very first, because lawyers usually have sharp eyes."

Linton frowned.

"But the law has no claim upon Captain Vane Carrington, since his brother declined to prosecute. It must not be, Perrin—for the daughter's sake! Do you hear?"

The detective was silent for a minute, but his eyes never left Linton's face.

"My work is not yet done," he said at last. "Captain Carrington forged his brother's name for several large sums of money——"

"And Sir John met the bills."

"Yes, Sir John met the bills, but a chance clue put me on the scent of higher game. It was only a suspicion at first; now it is a certainty. This in no wise affects the late Baronet's affairs, but it seriously affects Captain Carrington, though he is not the chief offender—at least, his was not the master mind."

Victor waited for him to go on.

"Well, I have only told you half a story, sir; but I know that I can trust you with a whole one. Lawyers know how to treat a confidence." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Some years since somebody high in the confidence of the Executive in India supplied the officers of another Power with the secrets of an Indian mobilisation scheme, together with drawings of fortifications; I want that man and his accomplices."

He smiled, looking in the direction of Carrington and the Rajah, who were walking on high ground towards the Castle.

"And you believe that you have them?" asked Linton slowly.

"Part of them. It was I who caused the papers to print the false news concerning Sir John's intestacy. I knew that it would bring Captain Carrington to light, and that he would soon be followed by the sharks who wished to prey upon him."

Linton paced to and fro uneasily.

"This is bad business, Perrin," he remarked at last.

"As far as Miss Carrington is concerned, sir, I admit it is; but she would be far better without such a father as Captain Carrington. There will be one satisfaction to you, sir, in what I have told you—I shall keep my eye upon the young lady until I have bagged my birds. The gentlemen have gone into the house, and I may be wanted. By the way, if I can leave your orders with the head coachman, it will be an excuse for my being here if any questions are asked."

Victor was sick at heart.

"Oh, Miss Carrington and I are going for a drive! Send the carriage at once"—he looked at his watch—"she will be dressed by this

time. And, Perrin, you know where I am lodging, if anything occurs during the next few days? I shall probably be too busy to find time to come to Woodcroft."

"Yes, sir—your mine, of course."

"You have heard of this, too?"

"Nothing will happen of importance for a few weeks, Mr. Linton. And, although Miss Carrington will request the Rajah to leave the Castle, he will remain all the same."

Victor clenched his fists savagely, and there was an unpleasant expression in his eyes.

"Don't soil your hands by touching him, sir! Promise me that!"

"I won't promise anything of the kind. I only hope he will not cross my path!"

Victor strode away, his blood at fever-heat. His own troubles now became mere pigmies compared with the overwhelming disgrace that threatened the girl who was dearer to him than life itself. He remembered the national outcry when the discovery had been made that the Indian plans had been tampered with, and how the traitor had been universally condemned. And the whole story would have to be revived! Oh, unhappy Hilda! He felt within himself that Captain Carrington was the culprit, or had been the guilty tool of some cleverer scoundrel. How could he put Hilda upon her guard—how break the terrible news ever so gently? He could not—yet.

Half an hour had elapsed, from the time of his ordering the carriage, when he went back to the Castle; the vehicle was waiting. The butler was standing in the entrance-hall, sleek and grave-looking.

That scene lived long in Victor's memory. The appearance of luxury and peace was so utterly at variance with the real state of things. Who would dream that "Bartlet" was Tom Perrin, one of the most relentless detectives that had ever lived? Who would have thought that the smiling Captain now approaching him was a thief, a forger, a traitor to his country? And the graceful figure behind—the Prince Ali Narain?

"Going for a drive, Linton?" the Captain asked. "A delightful day for it! I wish that we had been asked to accompany you and Hilda!" He looked worried, and spoke in an undertone. "My guest is so touchy; and it is hardly the thing for Hilda to fly off without a word, so soon after the Prince's arrival!"

"My dear Captain, what has your prince to do with Hilda? He was not invited to the Castle; and really I don't care even to make his acquaintance!" A glance from Bartlet made him refrain from saying more. "Yes, we are going as far as Nant Glaslyn Valley and Carnarvon."

The Rajah was now standing beside Captain Carrington, and Victor deliberately turned his back upon him. The Indian's dark face grew positively gray, and his eyes were ablaze.

A minute later Hilda appeared in the great hall, followed by Mrs. Staples-Lambert, who had been assisting her to dress. The Rajah bowed in his graceful way, and stepped to one side. The Captain fidgeted with his watch-chain, occasionally moistening his dry lips with his tongue. He followed his daughter to the carriage, and whispered—

"Hilda, my dear, you will be home to dinner, I hope? The Prince will be so disappointed, and really I have no wish to offend him!" His voice was plaintive.

"I cannot help his disappointment," the girl answered in cold tones of surprise. "And you will do well, father, to get rid of him to-day if possible. I shall not be home to dinner."

"My dear Linton, let me appeal to you! I dare not offend this man —or the consequences will be far-reaching!" he added warningly.

"Nothing can alter the course of fate, Captain!" said Victor.

And the carriage whirled away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

In saying what he did to Captain Vane Carrington, Victor Linton was carried away by the storm that was raging within him, and by his hatred of Prince Ali Narain.

Carrington watched the carriage in which his daughter and Linton were going for their drive cross the courtyard; then he strode after it as far as the great archway and saw it whirl along towards the lodge gates.

Thus he stood for fully a minute, repeating to himself again and again Linton's words, and recalling the young man's savage scowl.

"Confound him!" he muttered. "How much does he suspect—how much does he know? I have hoped great things of that young man, and now I find that he is a dangerous enemy! But my enemy or Ali's?" A fierce smile wrinkled his face. "I wish to Heaven he'd kill the infernal nigger!"

A hand was laid upon his shoulder, and he started guiltily.

"Or that the nigger would kill him—eh, Captain?" It was the Rajah's smooth voice. "A dangerous habit, that of yours, talking aloud! A 'nigger'? I don't think that there can be any semblance of friendship between us in the future; such an insult must not go unchallenged." He hissed the words into Carrington's ear. "Dog—you know that the blood of kings runs in my veins!"

"I have only your word for it," sneered the other. "I hurl your opprobrium back in your teeth! Dog—if you want a thrashing I am not too old to give you one!"

They faced each other, with clenched hands and glaring eyes, then the Rajah laughed.

"Fool! Our fortunes for good or ill are bound up in each other. You hate me—it is but natural—but spare your insults! I could ruin you with a word, but it would be my own undoing also while I am on British soil. I am poor, but you have glorious prospects, and I must share them."

The Captain frowned weakly, but made no reply.

"I must share in your prospects," repeated the Rajah, in his quiet masterful tones; "and our mutual enemy must be swept away. For that enemy we have not far to seek, as I gathered from your mutterings. But why are we standing here, where inquisitive servants can see us?"

They moved slowly away together, and the Oriental continued—

"I am in love with the charming Hilda and her fortune—the fortune most of all—I think I both love and hate her. You have seen how she treats me—scornfully and contemptuously—and yet she has already felt the effects of my power! In a little while I could mould her will to mine; and in years to come she will make a splendid woman. I did not intend to say these things so soon, but I have by chance discovered your true sentiments towards me, and I have discovered that the young lawyer is not our friend." His teeth gleamed, and he laughed in that low way of his. Then he rolled a cigarette, apparently thinking deeply as he did so. "A daughter will do much for her father when it is to save him from a criminal's death!"

Carrington leaned against a tree for support, a clammy moisture breaking out on his brow.

"What you dream of is impossible," he said huskily; "you don't know my daughter's temper. By Heaven, she would kill you! I wouldn't permit it myself, bad as I have been. As I am now, I have something of a father's feelings!"

"And what is it that you object to, my friend?"

"You!" answered the Captain, in tones of fierce disgust.

The Rajah smiled; his claws were hidden in their velvet shield again; he puffed at his cigarette.

"Your daughter's lover—ah, we mix like oil and water! I have seen him look at me; he hates me and he fears me." He shrugged his shoulders, and his brow darkened. "And now, Carrington, with what did he threaten you and me?"

"Nothing definite; but he gave me the impression of overwhelming knowledge." The Captain spoke moodily. "It may have been my fancy——"

"It was not! If you turn traitor a second time——" He saw that the elder man's face was growing livid, and knew the danger-signal

well; his manner changed. "Pardon my suspicions, my friend! I have no desire to offend you; and an estrangement between us means ruin for both; Mr. Linton is our common foe. I will discover all—leave him to me! And, as for Miss Carrington, I may sue for her favours in the ordinary way—you will not object?"

"If she does not—no." The Captain smiled sardonically, but his face was very pale. Linton would be better out of the way. And what was he at the best? A detrimental, from a worldly point of view; and he was already assuming too many airs on the strength of his possible marriage with "Miss Carrington of Woodcroft Castle."

"He has quite resolved to treat me badly," thought Hilda's father; "and he could do so much if he chose! Together we might have outwitted this infernal Prince of Darkness, but I dare not trust him—I dare not! No, no—unless I sacrifice Mr. Victor Linton, I sacrifice myself; and I had hoped things would be so different!"

He sighed.

"You leave matters in my hands?" asked the Rajah. "That is well—you know that I never fail! Oh, you need not think that I shall do anything rash—I am an artist in everything!"

They returned to the Castle, and Carrington reflected—

"I may remain here after all; and Hilda knows how to take care of herself. She has the self-will and temper of Lucifer!"

* * * * * *

It was a delightful drive to Nant Glaslyn Valley. The lovers had so much to talk about, although Victor's mind was occasionally depressed by forebodings which were foreign to his usually sunny and hopeful disposition.

"I don't think that I shall feel quite happy," he said by way of explanation, "until I can get into communication with my father. What must his torture be if he believes that his good name is now dishonoured? We are advertising in the newspapers, and assuring him that all is well." He broke off suddenly, for Hilda's eyes seemed to read his very inmost thoughts.

"And is that all that gives you trouble, Victor?" she asked gently. "Are you not bothered greatly on my account? It is a shame that everything should go wrong at the same time! But have courage!"

Silence fell upon them, and they gazed at the glorious scenery. The

peak of Snowdon glistened in the sunlight, and, as the carriage wound out of a wild pass, they beheld, beyond a mile of wood and stream and bracken, the valley of Nant Glaslyn, where Victor's millions of "black diamonds" were hidden.

"Did we say that everything had gone wrong, darling?" he whispered into Hilda's ear. "No—not everything; in one short month that peaceful valley will be like a busy hive. There will be the sound of machinery in the moss-grown engine-house, and the green earth will soon be blackened by the output of the two great shafts which are now marked by rotting frames and rusty pulleys." He grew enthusiastic. "You see what money will do!"

The carriage came to a standstill within a few hundred yards of the future coal-fields, and Victor's eyes became moist.

"The scene," he murmured, "of my poor father's early hopes and fears, the bugbear of his life, and the ruin of his old age!"

"But you have good news for him, Victor?"

"Yes. But the problem is not solved yet, little woman."

"And it was that hateful debt that came between us?"

"Only for a little while. Pray Heaven that nothing worse may come between us, Hilda!"

"Nothing shall—nothing ever can! You are thinking of my father. Why should I be burdened with such a father? Ah, you cannot deceive me! There is some impending disaster."

She clenched her hands, and her eyes flashed in their old way. Victor soothed her with tender words. He knew that he was not speaking the truth, and Hilda knew it too.

The carriage was turned in the direction of Carnarvon. It was a long drive, but the horses were young and fresh.

At Carnarvon there was a rest of two hours. The lovers lunched in the town, and Victor purchased copies of the latest books for Hilda to read.

"I shall be so busy for the next few weeks," he said, "though I shall write to you every day. And I don't want to visit the Castle very often until the Indian has gone and taken your father with him. The man raises all of the old Adam that is in my nature, and I feel that I should like to fling him into the lake!"

"The Rajah leaves to-morrow," Hilda decided mentally, though she

did not utter her thoughts aloud, "even if he has to be ejected by my servants!"

The sun was setting redly over the hills when the carriage rolled up to the Castle gates. Victor had been left at Llanberis, as it was possible that Mr. Growcott would be waiting for him at his lodgings, and his heart and mind were full of the new undertaking.

"Good-bye for the present, my darling!" he had whispered passionately. "I shall write you a long letter to-morrow. And you will let me know by telegraph if—if anything goes wrong at the Castle? I will arrange that all messages shall be promptly delivered at the works."

"Yes, dear"—Hilda's eyes were moist, but she smiled through her tears—"and your *bête noir* shall go to-morrow."

"I am afraid not," he answered equivocally; "but Bartlet will take care that no harm befalls you."

Hilda thought of the speech afterwards with strange misgivings, but she steeled herself against them.

"We will see to-morrow," she muttered to herself.

CHAPTER XIX.

HILDA went to her boudoir at once, with a view to avoiding her father and Ali Narain. As for the Indian prince, she did not wish to see him again; his softly-modulated voice and the glitter of his eyes had filled her with disgust, not unmingled with an indefinable fear. And Victor's vague warning recurred to her with uncomfortable persistency.

Her chaperon, suave and smiling, was in prompt attendance. On a table were the cards of several callers; but these were of no interest to Hilda. She decided that a cup of tea would be all that she would require that evening.

"My dear Miss Carrington," Mrs. Staples-Lambert mildly protested during a conversation after tea, "the visit of the Badens really ought to be returned! Then there are the Montagues. Mr. Montague is first cousin to an earl; and so much depends upon one's popularity in the county!"

"I have no desire to be popular with people who are nothing to me!" was the indifferent rejoinder.

"But you can't afford to offend the Badens and the Montagues!"

"I have not sought their friendship."

"This is where my experience should be of use to you," persisted the chaperon. "Of course your life hitherto has been one of positive seclusion; but, now that you are somebody with a position to maintain, it is my duty to correct your wrong impressions. I am sure that Captain Carrington will fully endorse——"

"Captain Carrington has no voice in the regulation of my affairs!" interrupted Hilda haughtily.

Mrs. Staples-Lambert flushed.

"Hitherto my services have been appreciated, and my advice to young girls has never been questioned; but you treat me as you would your cook, Miss Carrington!"

"I wish you gave as little trouble! You are dissatisfied, and I request you to resign! It will be an incalculable relief to me."

"I pity your inexperience and your ignorance, Miss Carrington!" retorted the chaperon, deeply mortified. "And I would have you remember that I am a lady by birth and education!"

"It is not I who forget it. I shall be glad if you can make it convenient to go to-morrow, or the next day at latest. I will instruct Mr. Molson to pay what money is due to you in lieu of notice."

Mrs. Staples-Lambert became wrathful. She had always hated Hilda from the bottom of her heart; her dreams of completely swaying the motherless, friendless young mistress of a great house had been crushed at the very beginning. She gave vent to her disappointment as only a vindictive woman can.

"And no doubt you will try to injure me with Mr. Molson, who is making up to you? But he is only doing it for the sake of what he can get out of you; he knows you quite well enough—knows your murderous temper! A nice life you led the poor schoolmistress—Miss Morgan! Your reputation is a most enviable one! Yes, I will leave the Castle to-morrow, or the next day, or next week, if it suits me!"

Hilda sprang to her feet, her eyes aflame.

"Leave my room, woman!" A deathly whiteness overspread her face, and she glanced about her as though in search of something.

The chaperon saw the glance and interpreted it, then quickly withdrew, laughing hysterically.

The girl locked the door, her heart raging within her, but no tears came to her relief; it was so long since she had cried—except when something had intervened between her and her lover! She seemed to be surrounded by enemies; and yet she had a heart so capable of loving!

An hour had passed away, and Hilda was gazing from the window in the direction of the lake and the ruined tower. The sun had sunk behind the hills, and the ruin looked like a black shadow; in the darkness the thicket surrounding it appeared to be impenetrable. A mist was rising from the hidden lake.

There was a knock at the door, but Hilda did not heed it. The summons was repeated, at first gently, then peremptorily, and a voice demanded—

"Hilda, are you there?" It was Captain Carrington.

"Yes—what do you want?"

"A few words with you."

She rose and opened the door, and her father walked in. His face was paler than usual, and there were deep lines under his eyes; he seemed to have aged years in a single day. There was little pity for him however in Hilda's heart.

"The Rajah is asking for you," he said; "he fears that he has unwittingly given you offence. These Eastern people are so imaginative! Will you come down-stairs, if only for a short time, and give us some music? I know that you play exquisitely—you inherit that talent from your mother."

"My mother?" repeated Hilda, with a pang at her heart. "Ah, my mother!"

Carrington glanced at her swiftly, and continued simply—

"I loved your mother in my selfish careless way."

"I have heard that you broke her heart. And you have put another woman in her place."

"I have been a fool all my life," he said despondently; "but, when all is said and done, Hilda, I am your father, and at least I ask for your forgiveness if not your love. I have been weak, but it is not for you to judge me. If I can make amends——"

She turned to him impulsively.

"Father, if the past could be blotted out! But it cannot—it cannot! You must see that I am unhappy about you and the mystery that surrounds you! Why did you come here at all?"

"Because I believed that Woodcroft was mine by right," he answered truthfully. "But shall we talk of these things at another time? The Prince is my guest, and I must not leave him too much to his own devices."

"Or His Highness might take the silver!" the girl said scornfully. "Your guest, father? Is he not your master? And I want you to understand that the man must leave the Castle to-morrow. If he refuses my servants shall turn him out! I am not going down-stairs to entertain him, because I loathe the creature!"

Carrington rose from his seat and paced the floor, wiping his brow now and again.

"Hilda," he pleaded at last, "you are right—the Indian is my master; he holds my liberty—my very life—in the hollow of his hand! It is a terrible thing for me to have to tell you this, but no confession of mine can cause me to sink lower in your estimation; and I must confess in order to save myself—perhaps to save Victor Linton."

She turned upon him like a tigress.

"What has Mr. Linton to do with such as you and your friends?"

He writhed under the sting of her words.

"I will tell you everything now," he answered in an undertone. "And I am glad that the light is too far gone for you to see the shame in my face—for even I am not sufficiently hardened to have lost all sense of shame! You have heard of my traitorous conduct towards my dead brother when we were both young men? It was inexcusable, but I did not think so then. A woman came between us, and men do not stop to think of brotherly love at such times. He never forgave me—in fact, he hunted me like a wild beast! Riches and honour fell upon him, while my portion was poverty and infamy. Still, the fact of my relationship to one so high and trusted obtained me the *entrée* to the best society of Calcutta and Simla, and especially of Bombay—no one there knew of the actual quarrel between my brother and me, and John was much admired and feared. Besides, I held a commission in the British army."

He paused abruptly and listened at the door.

"I thought I heard some one," he explained hoarsely. "A guilty conscience makes a man so nervous and so suspicious!"

He moistened his lips with his tongue, and continued rapidly—

"Let me repeat—I was a favourite everywhere because I was what is commonly known as 'good company.' I was proficient at all sports, and was in request for theatricals and so forth, and I was the great Sir John's brother! Among my acquaintances was Prince Ali Narain—confound him!—the only son and heir of an impoverished Rajah. He was a very young man then, but was handsome and fascinating. It was his boast that no woman could withstand him; and of a truth his power was always remarkable, though such a thing creates no wonder in the East."

Hilda shuddered.

"Well, I contracted a number of gambling debts, and—looking back now I can see it—Prince Ali Narain was ever my evil genius. Most of the things I have done were suggested by him, and, when his will was brought to play upon mine, I was like a man whose mind was under the influence of a narcotic. I obeyed him with a full knowledge of my folly, and at the same time with the desire to spring at his throat and kill him!"

His eyes gleamed savagely in the half-light.

"I became deeply involved. I had been tricked and cheated by the Prince through some of his infernal jugglery, and, with ruin staring me in the face, he suggested a means of salvation which filled me with horror. But he persisted, and the idea grew upon me until I regarded it almost calmly. Hilda, I was to become a traitor to my country—to commit a crime the penalty of which was death! Did I finally attempt the task? Yes, and a month later was enjoying the proceeds with the Prince."

A low cry of horror burst from Hilda's pale lips.

"But no harm resulted," the Captain went on almost triumphantly. "It was immediately discovered that plans had been tampered with, and a score of innocent men were suspected. Until this day the real traitors have remained undetected, though there have been times when I have trembled for my safety, as the machinery of the law, once started, never rests until some one is punished, rightfully or wrongfully.

"A few years later I left India. You were a little child then, and I sent you to Llanberis, confident that my brother would recognise you. I was too poor to do anything for you myself——"

"Don't refer to that, please!" Hilda interrupted in accents of pain.

He bowed his head sorrowfully.

"I came back to Europe, and Heaven alone knows how I have lived! I think that my name has become infamous in certain quarters of every continental city. One thing in my wife's favour—she has clung to me through it all with a dog-like devotion! I wrote a score of pathetic letters to your uncle John, but he never responded. Then I began to hate him; and I thought that poverty

was my worst enemy, until one day Prince Ali Narain encountered me at Homburg.

"That was two years since, but I shall never forget the thrill of horror that quivered through my being! The whole of the wretched past rose up before me, and a mist of blood seemed to blind my eyes. That is always a sure sign that I am in a dangerous mood.

"He smiled at me in his terrible way, and said that he had searched Europe for me. He linked his arm within mine, and went back to my lodgings with me. Then he laughed at me for being a fool to live in poverty—the world was full of money, it only wanted getting at. His father, the Rajah, was dead, and with him had died every prospect of the life of an idle gentleman for his son Prince Ali; the British had robbed him of every acre of land—every rupee. But the world was wide, he said.

"Thus he talked; but there were diamonds on his fingers, and his pockets were well lined with gold. He lent me money, and jested about our 'little affair with the Government papers.' Every word stabbed me like a knife. I wanted to forget that I had been a traitor—I, who had worn the Queen's uniform—and that there was a price set upon my head.

"A few weeks passed, and the Prince came to the end of his resources. I confess that he had shared his money with me liberally, though he had done so with an object. Then he told me that we must put our heads together or starve. Gambling? Oh, no—it was hardly safe where we were! There were other tricksters looking for fools—more wolves looking for lambs to fleece. 'Dog rob dog' was not his game, and, in the event of a row, a man of his colour stood a poor chance. Then he unfolded his plan. I must use my brother's name on paper—I must forge Sir John Carrington's signature. My brother and I wrote very much alike, and I could easily do that little trick of Sir John's which the bankers always looked for—a peculiar scroll, pointed by a silly sort of dot. Have you noticed it, Hilda?"

The girl started violently. How could he pause to ask her such a question? She waved her hand for him to proceed, her lips remaining sealed.

"I refused at first, positively and indignantly, then feebly, for Prince Ali Narain sighed and shrugged his shoulders, reminding me of the sum

of money I was worth to him. The Government would pay well for what he could tell them concerning me; and it would take a long time to prove his complicity, if it could be done at all. I must sign the bill for five hundred pounds, and he would see that it was paid; Sir John should never hear of it. Money we must have!

"I signed a bill at three months, and the Rajah got it discounted. He gave me a portion of the proceeds. Three months was ample time in which to repay the money. So I hoped, but in less than one month we were both penniless again. I will not prolong this hateful part of my story. Other bills were signed, but only one was ever met by your uncle John, and he knew who was the forger.

"I have dwelt upon this, Hilda, to vindicate myself in a measure in your eyes—to show you that I should never have used my brother's name but for the Rajah's power over me; I am not so utterly lost to all sense of honour and decency.

"When the bills were proclaimed to be forgeries the police were put upon our track, and we parted. I was glad of this, and prayed that we might never meet again. I hid myself in London, obtaining a livelihood by frequenting certain gaming-houses. I was reduced to this because I could do nothing else, and was afraid to stir out by day lest some one should recognise me.

"Then came the news of my brother's sudden death, and the report that I was his heir. I saw it in several papers, and I was delirious with delight; it was my salvation. I should go no longer in fear of my creditors. The howling wolves would become meek and patient lambs. I was a wealthy man, and worthy of respect. Oh, yes—I should pay all my debts with interest!

"I came—and I make no excuses for my conduct towards you, Hilda; I was not my sane self—but a fearful Nemesis was at my very heels, and the disappointment would have killed many men, especially as it was accompanied by the discovery that you both hated and despised me—that you were a woman with a strong will, and not a child to be influenced by me.

"Again I had visions of my creditors when the truth became known; and their agents have been here already. However, they feel sure of their money, arguing that my daughter will not stand quietly by and see me taken to prison.

"But, to crown my misfortunes, Ali Narain was also drawn hither by the false news, and he holds above me the old threat, Hilda—the old threat!"

He bowed his face over his hands, and the girl turned to him impulsively. The bent figure appealed to her piteously.

"What will this man take to free you for ever?" she asked. "But you must leave here—leave the country—or you will never be safe. Would it not be better to throw yourself upon the mercy of the law?"

"No, no—I dare not—I, who once wore the Queen's uniform! And there is Victor Linton—he suspects what I am and who I am. These lawyers get to know so much! No, no! There is only one way—I must kill this infernal Indian! I am seeing red again—a mist is before my eyes—red!"

He started up and paced the floor.

"Father—father!" Hilda's tones were full of horror.

He laughed wildly.

"I am raving again—my troubles have turned my brain! And it is this which maddens me—the terms—the last terms which the Rajah dictates! He wants to marry you, Hilda—he swears that nothing less will satisfy him! Do you not see that we are bound hand and foot by the arch-fiend? And a life is nothing to him! A poisoned flower, the very breath of which kills silently and mysteriously—I have seen it done! If you could pretend to listen to him graciously, to deceive him until I am far away, though it will be the death-blow to my hopes of earthly peace to have to become a wanderer again—if you could pretend, Hilda!"

"I can make no such pretence!" she answered coldly. She stood at the window as if turned to stone, her figure sharply outlined against the moonlit panes. "I can make no such pretence, and it is cowardly of you to demand it of me! I should kill the man if he attempted to speak flattery in my ears! While I pity you, I feel that you are my bitterest enemy. The shadows of your sins fall upon those whom it should be your duty to shield and protect! And, knowing all that threatens you and me and my happiness, you have persisted in remaining here against my wishes—you hope to do so still, thinking only of your own interests!"

"No, no!" he breathed. "I might have given you and your lover up to the black arts of Prince Ali Narain!"

"Nonsense! I have no belief in his mystical power." She remembered his satyr-like eyes, his seductive voice, and shuddered. "Father, if you will not give yourself up, you must leave the country secretly. I will provide you with all the money you require. It is a great pity that such worthless men as you are permitted to live! Misery for others is ever in your train."

She spoke with intense bitterness. Carrington interrupted her with an angry ejaculation, for the door had opened silently, and Bartlet was standing on the threshold.

"I beg pardon, I am sure!" he said. "I knocked twice, and thought that I was told to come in."

He retreated swiftly and silently, without waiting for any reply.

The Captain stood irresolute.

"Is that all, Hilda?" he asked hopelessly.

"That is all."

He turned and left the room, a strange set look on his white face.

"I might have saved myself by the sacrifice of Victor Linton," he thought—"might have done it but for that infernal Indian's latest terms! Still the end would have been the same, I have no doubt. What is the use of flying—I cannot shake that sleuth-hound off my track? Hilda says that it would be better for all if I were dead, and I think so too."

He almost ran against the butler in the darkness of the passage, and was conscious that the last words had been uttered aloud.

"So, Mr. Sneak, you are spying about here now?" the Captain growled wrathfully. "If I were master of Woodcroft I should kick you out of it at short order!"

"Yes, sir," Bartlet answered.

"None of your insolence!" He raised his clenched fist, but let it drop again suddenly. "I am a fool—I make enemies everywhere! You were listening at the door of Miss Carrington's boudoir, and you heard her say she wished that I was dead—you heard her advise me to fly? Well, I ask you not to tell your fellow-servants just yet—it may be worth your while, Bartlet, though I know that it is torture for people of

your order to keep your mouths shut. And don't give me any of your cheek, sir!"

"If I have annoyed you, Captain Carrington, I regret it sincerely!" Bartlet answered honestly.

The Captain passed on; he was in a reckless mood.

"I will go into the open air to smoke and think," he muttered. "As for the Rajah—the deuce take the nigger! Then I will break the news to my wife—poor creature!"

CHAPTER XX.

Sick at heart, Hilda stood looking from the window, conscious of nothing but her own misery, until she was startled by the striking of the clocks.

Nine? She could hardly believe that it was so late. The moon had risen over the ruined tower. Though it wanted seven or eight days to the completion of its glory, it gleamed brilliantly in the purple sky. Below, the world was almost as light as day, save in the murmuring mystical woods.

Hilda had opened the window slightly, for, though the night was really cool, the heat had seemed stifling, the thoughts which crowded into her brain having raised her blood to fever-heat.

The fragrance of cigar-smoke floated upwards, and she became aware that her unhappy father was walking beneath her window, his hands thrust deeply into his pockets. Another figure crossed the lawn and joined the Captain, and Hilda heard the Rajah's droning voice.

"Ah, my friend, I have been looking for you everywhere but in the right place!" he said. "Is this the proper way to treat your guest? You left me, how long since?—two hours—to request the charming Hilda to give us some music, and, lo, this is where and how I find you!"

"My daughter refused absolutely!" Captain Carrington spoke with restraint.

"How unkind!" murmured the Indian. "But possibly she wishes to dream of her lover, whose kisses are still fresh upon her lips. It does not matter in the least, Carrington—to-morrow she will be pleasant to me!"

"Not she! She loathes you!"

"You are pleased to be candid, Captain. But most people get to like me against their will in time—yourself, for instance!"

"I?" Carrington turned furiously upon the other. "You know that I hate you!"

"Because you fear me?" The Indian remained unmoved.

"My fear is dead, and I shall kill you if you cross me too often!"

He turned fiercely away, and the Rajah laughed mockingly.

"There is one consolation in this, Captain—you have the quality of being honest with me, but we shall be good friends to-morrow! I am quite decided, and your daughter shall be a princess—on that I am determined also."

The two men walked in opposite directions. Hilda's heart was cold with dread; her first thought was to write to Mr. Molson, but she decided at once that she could not do that. Her father's position was an awful one; he must be given time to escape, and then the Indian could tell his story if he chose. But, in the meantime, must she endure the Indian's presence at the Castle and utter no word of protest? She was surrounded by her servants, and yet the man terrified her. For her father's sake she would have to endure him, to listen to his fulsome speeches, and to meet the light of his glittering snake-like eyes.

But Victor was near, and to Victor she must make a full confession, though she shrank from the ordeal—from the infliction of further pain upon the man she loved. She knew that under his sunny nature there lurked a fierce and passionate temper—swifter than her own, if less vindictive—and, if he came into conflict with Prince Ali Narain—— The thought sent a chill through her heart.

She retired to her bed-room unattended. She had been so accustomed to do everything for herself that she required no help. In obedience to her summons, the housekeeper brought her a glass of wine to steady her shaking nerves.

"Is that all, Miss Carrington?" Mrs. Maxwell asked kindly. She saw with concern the deathly pallor of her young mistress's face.

"Yes—thank you! Stay, the room seems so cold! There must be a touch of frost in the air. Will you please have the fire lighted for me, Mrs. Maxwell? I shall read for a little while."

In a few minutes the fire was crackling cheerfully. The housekeeper said "Good night!" and Hilda sat down before her fire. Do what she would, the handsome evil face of the Indian Prince constantly flitted before her vision. How ridiculous were her fears! Until now she had always been so independent and so brave. But, as the constant

dripping of water wears away the hardest stone, so the constant strain, the vague fears, the terrifying secret of her father's had gradually worked her up to a pitch of intense excitement under an apparently calm exterior.

Until midnight she sat gazing into the fire, undecided; the morning found her in the same irresolute state of mind. She breakfasted in her own apartments, and then was tempted out of doors by the perfect beauty of the morning.

Captain Carrington joined her on the lawn, his face looking drawn and gray. He seemed to have aged greatly during the night; nevertheless, there was a fierce light in his eyes.

"Good morning, Hilda!" he said quietly. "It is good to be young and free to do as you please."

Hilda looked up at him half sorrowfully. This was the first time there had been any real sympathy between them.

"Good morning, father! I have just been thinking, and it will be best for you to go away from here quietly, unknown to everybody. Your wife can remain until it is safe for you to send for her. And you need never want anything——"

She stopped, for he was gazing at her gloomily.

"It is kind of you to think of me at all! I must do as you wish—become an outcast once more—it will gratify Victor Linton at least."

"You are unreasonable!" Her eyes were flaming with anger. "What has Mr. Linton to do with you?"

"Oh, there is no love lost between us! I shall never forget his words and his looks. I am unreasonable perhaps—forgive me! I never want to quarrel with you again, Hilda. If I can get away secretly—to America or somewhere—my wife will be left in good hands, I am sure. I have told her the new position, and she bears it well. The reverse is dreadful for her, poor soul!" He spoke half to himself. "And, when I have got a respectable start, you can have the Rajah ducked in the lake—if he is not there already! Ha! ha!"

He laughed at the gruesome joke, and then began abruptly to talk of other things.

"I am interested in Mr. Linton's mine," he said; "and we have talked about it a great deal, until he turned against me all at once. I am sure that I wish him every possible success!"

"He will be here this evening," Hilda said; "and then you and he can talk together. I am sure that it will be wise to let him know everything."

The Captain laughed sardonically.

"Ah, here comes the infernal Indian! I dare not trust myself alone with him! He cannot injure you in this glorious sunshine—I will go."

Then Hilda became aware of the Rajah's presence. His head was bowed before her, and his soft voice murmured—

"It is so good to see you, Miss Carrington—as bright and fresh as the morning itself!"

Hilda did not reply, but she felt impelled to face him. She felt almost ready to faint.

He smiled into her eyes.

"Your father is not in good form to-day. I am sorry; he is so old a comrade, and we are so much in sympathy! Can you not be a little kinder to him? I ask it because he is troubled on account of your coldness. Do not think me impertinent, Miss Carrington—I would die rather than offend you—but I am so fond of my old friend, passionately fond of him!"

Her loathing deepened, but she could give no expression to it.

He continued—

"Ah, this is the ring which you admired so much upon the blissful day of our first acquaintance! Will you accept it, Miss Carrington, as a token of my affection for your father, and of my high esteem for yourself—whose guest I am? It is unique, *bizarre*, an heirloom in my family—a charm, a talisman. It will fit the middle finger of your right hand, and you will wear it—a little present from your grateful friend, Ali Narain—the devoted friend of your father."

The ring lay in the palm of Hilda's hand—a snake with flashing ruby eyes. She turned cold all over.

"I have never admired it—I have never seen it before," she said, struggling against his magnetic will.

"Ah, surely you forget! It was in the conservatory—under the palms. I told you its history. This gem was originally worn by the ruler of a mighty nation. May I pass it on your finger—this one?"

"No—no! I cannot accept any gift from you!"

She was looking into his glowing eyes, and he smiled.

"I think you will, Miss Carrington—you are only teasing me."

A swift footstep was heard behind them, and Captain Carrington strode up, his face livid with wrath.

"Throw the accursed thing away, Hilda!" he cried.

As though awakened from a dream, she obeyed him, tossing the ring far into the grass, and, turning, hurried towards the house, while the two men faced each other.

CHAPTER XXI.

After her interview with her father in which he explained to her the power Prince Ali Narain held over him, and told her how he feared being brought to justice for his treachery, Hilda was thoroughly frightened. There would be no hesitation on her part now to tell Victor everything, no matter how humiliating the revelation might be.

The moment she reached the Castle Bartlet was in close attendance upon her. He eyed his young mistress keenly, his lips compressed into a thin line.

By a great effort she composed herself sufficiently to speak distinctly.

"Bartlet, I wish you to send a letter for me to Mr. Linton by a mounted messenger. It is very urgent. I will write the letter at once; and, if Mr. Linton is not at his address at Llanberis, he will be at the Nant Glaslyn mine. You understand?"

Bartlet inclined his head.

Hilda went to her boudoir, where she was safe from interruption, and penned the following note—

"Dearest Victor—Remember your promise to come to the Castle this evening! Do come then—or earlier if you can! I am impatient to hear good news about the mine; and I have something to tell you. I am always in some sort of trouble, and am ashamed to be bothering you again so soon. I dismissed Mrs. Staples-Lambert last evening, and she made quite a scene. I don't believe that I have a real friend in the world, excepting you! I was hated at school by the mistress and the girls, and I am disliked now by my servants. I am beginning to wonder if I am really wicked and hateful! I know that you are filled with anxiety about your father, about the mine, and about the people surrounding me, but I am obliged to add to it. Oh, I feel so miserable! Let me know what time I may expect you; and send me a nice little letter by the bearer of this. "Your devoted "Hilda."

Twenty minutes later the messenger sped away, Hilda listening to the clatter of the horse's hoofs as he went.

It was four miles to Llanberis, and, if Victor should not be there, the messenger would have to go on to Nant Glaslyn, and she would have to wait several long hours.

The Rector of Llanberis came in to luncheon—at least, that was his excuse for coming—and Hilda was delighted to see him.

"I was sent for by one of your tenantry," he explained—"widow Watson, who lives in the red house behind the hill. You don't know her? Of course not! How should you so soon? She fancied that she was going to die—saw signs in the trees or something of the kind. She was cook here some twenty years ago, and actually believes in the ghost of the last lady of the Glyder Idwals!"

Mr. Jarvis laughed loudly. Then, breaking off suddenly, he gazed quizzically at Hilda's pale face.

"What nonsense!" he said. "I am frightening you, Miss Carrington?"

"No—I think that I am beyond that now."

"But you do not entertain any belief in ghosts walking in the grounds at midnight? You were always so matter-of-fact, and—pardon me!—somewhat masculine in your manner."

"I don't know what to believe," Hilda said, flushing faintly.

"Have you seen the wraith of Lady Mary Idwal?"

"I have seen something—a trailing figure in white, like gossamer—gliding over the eastern end of the lake, under the walls of the tower."

"Good gracious me! If anybody else had told me I wouldn't have believed it!" exclaimed the Rector. "Bless me, I am quite upset! No wonder you are getting pale and thin! We must exorcise the spiritual visitant."

"You are laughing at me! Pray let us drop the subject! Yes—you shall lunch with me and tell me the news. How are the babies, and Mrs. Jarvis?"

"The babies? Growing and crowing! And Mrs. Jarvis?" He sighed. "She is not very well; and she does not like Llanberis. Miss Morgan is as usual. Miss Lewis is always asking questions about you."

"I will call and see her—to-morrow perhaps; it is not good to slight one's friends."

"I see Mr. Linton every day," said the Rector, abruptly changing the subject—"and I know all about his schemes. Lucky fellow!" Then he added, "You have guests—I hope that I shall not be in the way?"

"Guests?"—with the old scornful curl of the lip. "Uninvited and a nuisance! My father's friends follow him to Woodcroft Castle." She wiped a tear from her cheek. "Mr. Jarvis, with all my good fortune, I am a most miserable girl! I don't mind confessing to you, because you have always been so kind to me. My life has always been one of toil and worry, but in a little while I must inevitably face the crowning trouble of my life—the result of a terrible crime!"

"Miss Carrington," exclaimed the Rector, "whatever do you mean?"

"You may soon have occasion to recall my words!" Her manner changed swiftly. "We will lunch together *tête-à-tête*, and you must not go away until Mr. Linton comes. No one will interrupt us—not even Mrs. Staples-Lambert—I discharged her yesterday."

"My dear—I thought she was a most estimable lady!"

"I never liked her!"

"I think, Miss Hilda, that you ought to cultivate a little Christian charity!" The Rector was uncomfortable.

"Ah, Mr. Jarvis, I am afraid you would not be very successful in teaching me that!"

"Why, Miss Carrington? Do you believe me incapable——"

"I do indeed! How could you succeed with such a spitfire as myself when you have failed with Miss Morgan and your own wife?"

The Rector was deeply mortified. How could Miss Carrington show such bad taste? But then she had always been a wilful impulsive child, and he knew that Miss Morgan was the most malicious gossip in Llanberis. As for Mrs. Jarvis—— He sighed, reflecting that, with all her faults, she was his wife, and was silent.

"I am sorry if I have vexed you, Mr. Jarvis," Hilda went on. "I say a great deal that I really do not mean."

"That is better than thinking a great deal that you do not say," he replied feebly,

"Do you think so?"

Captain Carrington crossed the terrace directly under the window, and the Rector waved his hand to him. The Captain did not appear to see however, for he passed on. Hilda was glad that he had not noticed the Rector's signal.

Recalling the encounter between him and the Rajah, she felt grateful to her father for the way in which he had tackled the Indian Prince.

But how would it all end? The thought of how the two men had glared at each other was terrifying—there was murder in the eyes of both!

"Captain Carrington looks very pale," the Rector remarked.

"Yes"—indifferently.

Hilda rose, and rang the bell.

"I am going to order luncheon for two to be served in here. I like this quiet snuggery; it was Sir John's favourite room."

"Won't you invite Captain Carrington and his wife? I have not yet made the lady's acquaintance."

"No," answered Hilda promptly; "my father has to entertain his friends. I hate the people he brings here!" She shuddered violently. "That is the reason why I am so glad that you have come; your presence is a protection."

This speech caused Mr. Jarvis some little perturbation, but he said nothing.

A dainty luncheon was served, but Hilda ate sparingly, pausing to listen to every sound. Several times she glanced from the window, which commanded a view of the courtyard and the great arched entrance from the main drive.

When the table was cleared she begged of the Rector to smoke.

"I know that you appreciate Sir John's cigars," she said; "and, oh, I love the smell of good tobacco! Sometimes I have a cigarette myself. We will remain in this room, if you please, until I have news of Mr. Linton," she added half pleadingly, half authoritatively.

"How nervous and unnatural the girl is to-day!" the Rector thought. "I must have a serious talk to Linton about her; it is clear that she and her father are at daggers drawn."

An hour passed, and the clergyman began to doze. The sensation was too delightful to be resisted, and there was no Mrs. Jarvis present

to disturb his peaceful slumbers and bring him rudely back to a consciousness of the wicked world with her complaining tongue. As for the children, bless them—— Then he slept.

The slamming of a door released him from the fancied grip of the ghost in the ruined tower, and he caught a glimpse of the skirts of Miss Carrington's dress vanishing through the doorway; then he began to collect his senses, and he yawned.

"Three o'clock!" he muttered in surprise. "And I promised to be back home at three. Now what is that girl up to?"

Hilda returned with a letter in her hand, her eyes sparkling.

"My messenger had to ride all the way to Nant Glaslyn, and has only just returned with Mr. Linton's reply. He will be here at five o'clock."

"I am glad because it pleases you, my child!" the Rector said kindly and earnestly. "Now can I do anything more for you—is there any trouble which I can help you to bear?"

"No—no! If it were possible, I should not hesitate to ask you, Mr. Jarvis. But when the blow falls you will understand."

"What an enigmatical speech!" He paused a moment for her to reply, then, as she did not do so, he continued, "If I can be of no further assistance to you I must go. It is sermon day to-day," he explained, with a rueful smile. "I shall see Mr. Linton to-morrow, and I hope to hear good news."

He shook hands with Hilda, his kindly eyes fixed on her face in bewilderment.

"There is a great deal of good in you, my child—truthfulness and unlimited capacity of self-sacrifice for those whom you can learn to love—but you must strive to be kindly and forbearing, to cultivate Christian fortitude and forgiveness; and then, with all your advantages, the world will become beautiful to you."

He left the room, but lingered in the great hall talking to Bartlet. He desired to say "Good day" to Captain Carrington, but did not wish to thrust himself upon him. However, the Captain was nowhere visible, and Mr. Jarvis went out into the courtyard.

He looked back at the window of Hilda's snuggery, and saw that she was reading Victor's letter. She had eyes and ears for nothing else.

CHAPTER XXII.

Soon after the Rector's departure Hilda retired to her favourite room, the boudoir. This room was situated directly over the small library, or smoking-room, where Sir John Carrington had lived almost exclusively. There was a small window set in a deep embrasure, which, from its height, commanded a perfect view of the winding carriage-drive beyond the wall that bounded the courtyard. From this window could be seen also the ruined tower, the battlements of which peeped above the tops of the trees.

Hilda sat on the broad window-seat and waited. Victor was coming, and the enemy would soon feel the weight of his righteous wrath. If he were forewarned, she need not fear the result of his meeting with Prince Ali Narain. The Indian's black arts—in which she half believed—would avail him nothing against Victor's anger and strength. Yet she trembled!

The housekeeper brought her some tea, and was unobtrusively attentive, while Bartlet, as ever, was watchful. He had taken Mrs. Maxwell partly into his confidence, knowing which way her sympathies lay and that she was a woman of sound sense.

"There is trouble brewing for the young mistress," he said. "Sir John foresaw it all, knowing what a bad lot the Captain was, and that Miss Carrington was the Captain's daughter. His last words to me were a request that I would watch over her, and Mr. Linton knows that she is practically under my care until they are married."

"I wish that they were married!" Mrs. Maxwell answered. "It needs the strong hand of a man about a place like this. And the young lady hasn't yet taken the trouble to interest herself in anything."

"Time for that—time for that!" Bartlet said sharply. "The business affairs are in good hands, and the most particular couldn't find fault with your management, Mrs. Maxwell. You mustn't be surprised at anything; and you must keep your own counsel. There's a shady lot at Captain Carrington's heels, and there'll be more of 'em before the

drama's done. I am in the know, and I tell you this because I feel I can do so without fear of its going any farther. I trust to you to keep an eye upon Miss Carrington."

Mrs. Maxwell was greatly impressed.

"I never believed you to be an ordinary butler, Mr. Bartlet; gentlemen do take to strange callings at times! I could never understand it myself—you, who was Sir John's secretary, and used to talk to him in French like a native!"

"I had my reasons, Mrs. Maxwell," Bartlet said sententiously. "Now you will keep your eye upon Miss Carrington when I am otherwise engaged?"

"It will be a pleasure, poor lamb—even if she does snap my nose off sometimes!"

Hilda however accepted the housekeeper's attentions gratefully, and even thanked her quietly and earnestly when her wants were anticipated.

"You are so kind and so thoughtful, Mrs. Maxwell!" the girl said. "But really I do not require anything more at present. If you insist upon looking after me in this way I cannot say 'Nay!'"—with one of her very rare smiles—"it is so pleasant to feel that I have some one near who is truly friendly!"

Mrs. Maxwell was delighted.

"The young lady is an ill-used angel!" she said to herself. "And she is quite pretty when she looks pleasant! Maybe she was thinking of her young man, who is due here at five—at least, that is what Mr. Bartlet said."

Even as the housekeeper went out of the room Hilda returned to her station by the window, for the rumbling of a distant vehicle had reached her ears. How well she knew the old flyman from Llanberis and his jog-trotting gray horse! The vehicle wound slowly along the drive, the driver flourished his whip, and the "crack" fell clear and sharp upon her ears. Victor had come!

Hilda almost flew down-stairs, heedless of the footman standing in he hall. Bartlet was talking in the courtyard to a man with a red moustache—a stranger, who glanced furtively and curiously at Victor Linton as he sprang out of the fly.

"You need not wait," Linton said to the flyman as he paid him his

fare. "I shall walk back to Llanberis. The evening looks fine, and there will be a moon."

Then he turned to Hilda, smiling fondly into her troubled eyes, and the lovers went straightway to Miss Carrington's boudoir.

When they were alone Victor took the trembling girl into his arms and kissed her passionately.

"Dear little woman! Why, where is all your bravery?"

"I am not brave a bit when you are away!" There were tears in her eyes. "My nerves are completely broken up. Oh, how I wish that Sir John had never sent for me, and that we had been permitted to follow the delightful plans we had made!" Then she added quickly, tremulously, "Victor, you must not walk to Llanberis to-night—the way is so lonely!"

"I am not afraid of anything, darling. And I am really cramped from constantly driving about lately! Who would dare to waylay me while I am armed with that trifle?"—pointing playfully towards a heavy stick which he had placed in a corner of the room. "What do you think of that for a weapon? The head of it is loaded with lead. It is quite a curious thing in its way, being nothing more nor less than the stem of an old grape-vine, which Mr. Reuben Growcott himself cut and dried. He gave it to me to-day. By-the-way, that reminds me that I have news for you, so we will sit together in your favourite embrasure and talk."

Hilda's confidence was fast returning; her lover seemed so calm, so strong!

"I was afraid that my letter would have alarmed you, dear!" she said, plunging at once into the subject which she feared most.

"Why should you be, sweetheart?" He was regarding her gravely.

"It was rather hysterical, wasn't it?"

"Yes—you fancied that you were in some very great danger."

Fancied? Oh, yes—it was best that he should know all, for his own sake as well as hers! And then she must prove to him the necessity for caution. His natural resentment must be kept in check at any cost.

"It is the Indian," she went on rapidly. "I hate—I loathe the creature! He is gifted with some evil power that makes one almost helpless if it be his will! Oh, darling, he attempted to make love to me! And my unhappy father is completely in his power."

She waited almost breathlessly for signs of Victor's sudden rage, but she saw merely a strange smile.

"I know all about it," he answered quietly, drawing her head down upon his shoulder; "but I have no intention of murdering him, as I might have done in ordinary circumstances." He set his teeth hard, then laughed roughly.

"Victor, darling, you mystify me!"

"Your father has made some confession to serve his own selfish ends?" he asked.

"How do you know this? Oh, Victor, you must not speak of him too harshly—he is my father, and blood is thicker than water! He is in danger—terrible danger—and every man's hand is against him!"

"He has brought it all upon himself, Hilda; and I have nothing but contempt for any man who thrusts his burdens upon others when he is driven to the wall and unable to sin any more. Don't think me unkind, dear—my anxiety is all for you! Now, I will be plain with you. As Captain Carrington desires to tell me as much as will suit him about his perilous position and his hopes of escape, it will be my duty to undeceive him. He cannot escape!"

A sharp cry of fear passed Hilda's lips.

"I say that he can, and he shall!"

Victor saw that she was regarding him with stormy suspicious eyes.

"He cannot—the police are here now! Be brave, little woman—the worst will soon be over! I think that he is wanted chiefly as a witness against the others. I half warned him, but he would not understand—not that it would have been of the slightest use!—and I was angry at the time. Detectives do not show their hand until they are ready for the final *coup*. The butler who is known here as Bartlet is a detective; he told me so yesterday, fearing that I had penetrated his disguise. He was originally sent to Woodcroft to run to earth Sir John's private secretary, who was suspected of being hand-and-glove with your father, as regards the forgeries, you know; and then matters began to develop in unexpected directions—the detectives often trace several crimes through a single criminal. It was discovered that the man who negotiated the forged bills under an English name was in reality an Indian prince, who has been wanted by the police for years. This man is Prince

Ali Narain. Two of his confederates were arrested this morning at Luxembourg.

"And all this," Victor continued, after a pause, "has sprung out of Sir John Carrington's sudden death and the announcement in the newspapers that Captain Vane Carrington was his brother's heir! The whole story was concocted by Bartlet, and your father promptly fell into the trap. Then the Oriental followed, hoping to fatten upon the power he held over your unhappy father. Bartlet—or, rather, Perrin, the detective, to give him his real name—sent me this news to-day, and I knew that you were safe from the schemers around you. I have heard too that you have been annoyed by the Indian. By Jove, it would be a pleasure to me to thrash him with my own hands!"

"Can nothing be done for my father?" Hilda asked, with a hopeless shiver. "Victor, if you had seen him to-day as I have seen him, your heart would have melted with pity!"

"He has no one to blame but himself; and, though I am very sorry for him, I cannot forget that he has wilfully brought this sorrow upon you. His conduct towards Sir John, too, from his very boyhood——"

"Hush!" She placed her fingers on his lips, and a sob escaped her. "Hush, Victor—nothing can redeem the past!"

There was a long spell of silence. The sun had sunk behind the hills, and the stars were brightening in the purple sky; the shadows of night were fast creeping over the land.

"I believe that I was happier as the poor drudge that Miss Morgan made of me," Hilda said at last. "Even then I had dreams of independence earned with my own hands and brain, and they were in themselves a feast of delight. Then you came into my life, darling, and, when I realised what your love really meant for me, I tasted of happiness to the full! You rescued me from slavery—you gave me freedom—and our little world was full of golden promise until Sir John Carrington made me a wealthy woman. That was the first bar to our marriage, and now——"

In a perfect passion of tears, she both praised Victor for his goodness to her and reproached him for his dislike of her father, whom, in her capricious and illogical way, she ended by blaming for his selfishness and cowardliness.

"How am I to bear it—the disgrace, the degradation? My father to

be arrested in my house! I shall hate the place for ever afterwards. How dare he bring such trouble upon me?"

"It will soon be over. Poor little Hilda, if I could have saved you from this! Captain Carrington has practically been under arrest for a week; the police have been waiting only to fill their net. The Captain's punishment will be light—I am convinced of that—and in a little while this seeming calamity will resolve itself into a mere incident in our lives. Had your father escaped, he would have known no rest or peace in any quarter of the globe, the machinery of the law having been once set in motion. Hilda, my darling, try to believe that it is for the best!"

"It is a pity he is not dead!" she answered fiercely. Then she hid her face on her lover's shoulder and wept.

In the midst of her tears a quick footstep was heard in the corridor without, and the door of the boudoir was unceremoniously pushed open. Victor Linton saw that the intruder was Captain Carrington, and that his eyes were blazing almost with the light of insanity. For a few moments he stood in silence; then a wild laugh escaped him, and he cried—

"So there you are, Linton! By heavens, if it were not for my daughter's sake, I would shoot you dead at my feet!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

CARRINGTON meant what he said—there was no mistaking that. The expression on his face was that of a madman, and, even in the half light, the scar on his cheek looked livid.

"You have had me entrapped simply because you wished to be sure of my permanent removal from Woodcroft Castle—my rightful home! Oh, don't deny it, after your treatment of me yesterday! The friend who accompanied you here this afternoon is a German detective; I know him well by sight. And no doubt there are others posted about."

"Yes—you and your master, the Rajah, are completely hemmed in," Victor answered quietly, though his voice quavered. "But you wrong me by imagining that I have had any hand in this. I had an inkling of it yesterday, and I warned you as far as I dared. It was useless though, for the police were at Woodcroft before you came, and they lured you here."

"Liar! It was your doing!" He dropped into a chair, and covered his face with his hands. Once Victor approached him, but he waved him off with a furious gesture. "I want none of your infernal homilies! At your age my hands were much cleaner than yours; I was not naturally vicious—I was too generous and yielding. The worst that people could say of me then was that I was a fool. You are silent, both of you—thinking of my dead brother's maudlin tale of my treachery! Is it wrong for two men to love the same woman? Never—so long as two men and a maid exist! And for this I have been made to suffer a lifetime of misery! John's implacable hatred has followed me everywhere, even setting my own child against me with his dying breath! He said that I caused the death of Lady Mary Idwal, that she was drowned in that very lake. Ah, well, her restless spirit must be satisfied now, for at last I am undone!"

He rose from the chair and reeled from the room, muttering wild words. Victor stood irresolute. Hilda's eyes were fixed upon him with an

expression of agonised entreaty in them. He took one of her hands, gripping it tightly.

"You see how utterly unreasonable your father is!" Victor said. "He deliberately accuses me of the basest kind of meanness. I am positive that he is mad! Hilda, I am almost afraid to leave you. I could find it in my heart to wish that the Captain and Prince Ali Narain were already formally arrested! I can't imagine why Perrin wishes to delay until to-morrow."

There was a silence more eloquent than words; then a long-drawn quivering sigh came from Hilda's lips.

"I will speak to Perrin before I leave," Victor continued presently. "But it is only two against half a dozen strong men. If however they became desperate, and were armed, some lives might be lost. Hilda, will you promise to lock yourself in your room?"

"I have no fear for myself; my father's hatred is directed against you, Victor. I shall never forget the awful glare in his eyes! And —and I saw something shining in his hand. I am sure that he is mad!"

"You need not worry about me," he answered almost carelessly.

Yet the idea of being shot at from behind a wall or a tree was not a pleasant one; and he had just seen Captain Carrington steal across the courtyard in the faint moonlight.

He changed the subject, though he felt that it was useless to talk of brighter things to Hilda in her present agitated state of mind.

"Dear one," he said, "this is the gloomiest meeting we have ever had! Have you any heart to listen to good news?"

"If it will please you to tell me, Victor, though my heart is very heavy. Ah, I am learning to hate Woodcroft Castle! I am sure that it is accursed! Why did my uncle send for me here? Why did he leave me his money? We were happy until then; but we have known no happiness since."

Victor spoke hopefully of the mine. The new machinery, he told her, was already on its way from a great midland centre, and a band of workers would be at Nant Glaslyn within a few days.

"I have faith now in the result," he said cheerfully; "and I shall be able to restore my father's good name. Have I told you that he has been discovered? Yes—he is at Stavanger, lying ill and delirious

with brain-fever. The papers he had with him were examined by a doctor there, who communicated with me to-day."

Again Carrington passed in the moonlight, and this time they both saw him.

Hilda began to tremble violently, for her father's manner was wild in the extreme.

Victor rose with sudden resolution.

"It is eight o'clock, and I have a long walk before me," he said, straightening himself. "Kiss me, darling—in the old way!"

She clung to him almost frantically, and sobbed on his breast.

"You will lock yourself in your room, and not leave it until the morning? Promise me, Hilda!"

"I promise."

"And I will speak to Perrin before I leave; a madman at large with a loaded pistol is a trifle beyond one's calculations. Darling little woman, what a shame that you should have to bear the burden of another's sin, and that other your natural protector!" He turned to a bowl of white camellias. "Give me one of these, Hilda—a buttonhole prepared by your own dear hands and pressed by your lips!"

The clocks chimed the half-hour after eight, and still he lingered. No—he would not have a horse; the night was perfect, and he had so much to think about; and he could always think most clearly while walking in the open country on a calm night.

"I wish that I had arranged to remain at the Castle," he said reluctantly, "until the danger was past! But it is impossible; Reuben Growcott is coming to my diggings at six o'clock in the morning, and we shall have to do several hours' work before we go to Nant Glaslyn. However, I shall be in constant communication with Perrin; and you know where to send any message!"

As he took his hat and stick, Hilda glanced fearfully from the window.

"One more kiss, little woman; keep a brave heart! I want to see you enter your bed-room and hear the click of the lock; then I shall feel that you are safe."

They went out into the corridor together, and Linton saw the figure of a man slip into a doorway at the farther end. This game of hide-and-seek was becoming unbearable.

"Good night, my darling!" he murmured. "I will watch you enter

your room, and when I hear the door locked shall be satisfied that you are safe. You shall hear from me in the morning by an early messenger, and I will follow later to help you to bear your trouble."

Tremblingly Hilda obeyed, with a promise on her lips which she had no intention of keeping.

"Good night, dear!" she whispered. "Kiss your hand to me at my window as you pass through the courtyard."

A minute later he was walking along the corridor towards the great staircase. How death-like the silence seemed! Soon however all would be strife and turmoil.

The very man he wanted to see was standing in the hall.

"You are going back to Llanberis, Mr. Linton?"

"Yes." Victor glanced at the detective significantly. "Captain Carrington has recognised a *confrère* of yours—a foreigner. The Captain is in a dangerous state of mind."

For once the detective was amazed and vexed.

"You surprise me, for I had regarded the disguise as perfect!" He shrugged his shoulders. "But it can make no difference."

"I am afraid for Miss Carrington! Why this delay if the bolt must fall?" He scorned to speak of the threat against himself.

Perrin frowned and pursed up his lips.

"I cannot explain; it is a blunder of officialdom—or officialism. But I shall take the affair into my own hands after your information. I have been ordered to wait, but I can wait no longer. You may rest assured that Miss Carrington will be spared as much as possible, and I will keep you posted as regards matters here. Good night, sir!"

Clearly the detective was disturbed.

Victor hesitated for a moment; but, Perrin having moved away, further speech was impossible without attracting notice.

In the courtyard Linton looked up at Hilda's window and waved his hand, and for a moment her face was pressed to the glass. He was satisfied.

The gate-keeper peered at him as he strode under the battlemented archway. A cloud passed over the face of the moon, and a chill wind swept from the hills.

Victor regretted that he had refused to take a horse; for the night was not so fine as he had imagined it would be—fleecy clouds were flying before a strong wind. Did this betoken a storm of rain? A great drop

splashed down upon his upturned face. It would be folly to walk to Llanberis, he decided.

He changed his course, turning in the direction of the stables. One of the grooms met him in the yard.

"Saddle Black Bess, Timmins," he said. "I intended walking to Llanberis, but there is every prospect of a dirty night."

"Would you prefer a carriage, sir?" the groom asked.

"No—I don't want to give too much trouble; and I can have the mare stabled at Llanberis until the morning, when I shall want to use her again."

"Very good, sir!"

In ten minutes Victor was riding away in the teeth of a fierce blast of wind. The trees creaked and groaned, and the leaves whirled hither and thither in clouds, while great rain-drops began to fall.

Once he fancied that he heard a sound like the crack of a pistol shot, but he smiled in self-contempt. His nerves were overstrained. Was the snapping of a twig to turn his blood cold?

Involuntarily the young man glanced in the direction of the ruined tower as he rounded a bend in the drive, and he saw a faint phosphorescent glow.

"Fancy again!" he muttered a little wrathfully. "All the same, I am beginning to dislike this place even as Hilda does. Now, Bess my lass, we must travel fast when once clear of the Castle grounds."

He glanced at the granite pile, which looked like a crouching giant in the darkness. The lights in the windows showed blurred and dim through the rain.

"Good-bye, my poor Hilda!" he murmured. "We must live for the future."

He thought that he heard a woman's faint scream—the shrieking of the wind. Then he saw a wild white face with staring eyes peering from among the limes in the avenue; but it seemed to melt away even as he gazed. Black Bess reared and plunged.

"Hang it all," he growled—"I am frightening the mare with my unsteady rein! Go ahead, my lass! It is your rider who is a fool!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE insane notion had taken possession of Captain Carrington that Victor Linton was his enemy. It was "this infernal limb of the law," as he termed him, who had raked up his past and had put the police on his track. And why? Because he wanted his own influence over Miss Carrington and her wealth to be supreme. It was all so clear—Linton, with all his cleverness and double-dealing, had been unable to disguise his real feelings!

Thus Carrington, in his mad mood, reflected, and the more he dwelt on the subject the firmer became his belief in his theory. He was ruined—ruined! There was no gleam of hope—before him was the criminals' dock or death, and death was preferable a thousand times! He was a traitor, a forger, and a thief! And the newspapers would be full of the details of his villainy.

"I can't face it!" he decided. "I will die, but not alone—there is Linton; and there is also my evil genius, the accursed Indian!"

He went up to his daughter's boudoir, and, finding Linton there, gave utterance to his raging thoughts. But his purpose was changed; for he reflected that Hilda cared for Linton—was his promised wife—and Hilda would be good to her step-mother, so he would not harm his daughter's lover. And Linton's sin was sure to find him out! But there was another—the man who had caused his utter downfall!

Bareheaded, he rushed into the courtyard to cool his throbbing temples; then he remembered that he must speak or write to Hilda, and must kiss his wife "Good-bye." He cared for her in his way, though he had led her a life of privation and misery.

He went to his room and scribbled these lines—

"I shall die to-night after I have killed my worst enemy. Why should I live to disgrace you more? The police are here; and, when I think of them, I am appalled by the magnitude of my crimes. I am one of those unfortunate creatures who are born under an evil star; no matter how good their intentions, they always fail, and drag the

innocent with them in their downfall. I want you to forgive the wrong I have done you, because I could not help myself. And, now that it is too late, I am beginning to realise what I owed to you in the matter of parental duty. But forget and forgive, for, when you read this, my life will be over! But I am determined to send another before me!

"Good-bye, Hilda! And one last request—be kind to my wife! Whatever her faults, she has been faithful to your unhappy father,

"VANE CARRINGTON."

"The servants or the police will find it here," he thought grimly, as he sealed up the letter and addressed it to Hilda. "But when? Not until my checks are handed in!"

He left the gruesome message on the table, and went to Mrs. Carrington's room, which adjoined his own.

His wife was reading a novel, and merely glanced up as he entered; his comings and goings were erratic, and she was rather afraid of him.

"Alice"—his voice was hoarse—"put down that trash and listen to me! I am sorry if I have startled you, but I want to say 'Good-bye' to you, my girl."

"Good-bye to me? Not if I know it! Where you go I go. I wish we had never come here to be treated like dirt!" She began to cry in her hapless way.

"Don't snivel, Alice! I've never been over-good to you, but I am going to do you the best action of my life!" He laughed boisterously. "Let me kiss you, and don't ask questions! And, my poor girl, always remember that I never under-estimated your good qualities! Better a thousand times for you had you married my orderly!"

"Vane, my dear, whatever are you talkin' about? How can you compare yourself—you a gentleman—with the like of Serjeant Jaggers? It's cruel of you, my dear!" Mrs. Carrington's handkerchief went up to her face.

Her husband looked at her fixedly, and the wild light in his eyes softened a little.

"It will be all right soon, Alice. Don't fret—that's all! Everything will be explained to-morrow."

"Don't go out again, dear—spend the evenin' with me!" she pleaded. "I do hate that Prince Ali, an' wish your daughter would send him to

the right-about! If I was the mistress here, as you thought I should be, he'd have to pack up pretty quick!"

Carrington bent and kissed his wife's brow; then he nodded and left the room without another word.

Conscious that even the servants might be spies, he had asked the Rajah to meet him near the lake, thinking they would not be interrupted there. He clutched the revolver in the breast-pocket of his coat. That the Prince would be at the place appointed he never doubted; he had noted with satisfaction the swift flash of alarm in the Indian's dark eyes, the sudden compression of his thin cruel lips. These Asiatics were crafty, but, as to the powers they claimed for themselves—Carrington laughed—what utter folly they were in a real crisis!

The clouds were scurrying over the face of the moon. How the wind blew, how the ice-cold rain beat upon his bare head!

With swift feet he crossed the moat, passed over the lawns and terraces, and struck into the little wood that bounded the lake. Then he stood irresolute until a tall figure loomed before him, and as he recognised the Indian the hot blood rushed through his veins.

"Is that you, Prince Ali Narain?"

"It is I, my friend," came in cooing tones. "You requested me to meet you here, and now you pretend surprise!"

"I pretend nothing."

"Bah! You are quarrelsome—I read your thoughts."

"Stuff! Your thought-reading is, like yourself, a fraud—humbug through to the core!"

The Rajah laughed.

"I have never failed to read your thoughts, Captain Carrington, and to anticipate your every action. You wish me to give up the supreme effort of my life, and I decline. Mind, you have already insulted me and crossed me once to-day, and it must not occur again!" He hissed out the last sentence. "I shall make a princess of the charming Hilda!"

"You fool!"

"I wear a flower in my coat which she dropped to me from her window—see, a white camellia! Now do you realise the extent of my power? She will come to me in a day or two of her own free will—or what will seem like her own free will."

"Liar! Your power? Faugh! And your knowledge? Why, you don't even know now that we are tracked and doomed! The police are in the house—they have come to take us—they know that we are here, and will follow us in a moment! And you talk of your power!"

The Indian reeled backwards.

"Your knowledge?" repeated Carrington, following him and glaring at him. "You craven humbug and cheat! And to think that I have been led by such a thing as you—that I have been your dupe and servant! But the end has come; I have only one more thing to do—to save the hangman a little work."

A report like the crack of a whip rang out, startling a bird in a tree above them. The moonlight broke through a mass of flying cloud and penetrated faintly even to where they stood. Prince Ali Narain leapt forward brandishing a heavy stick; a cry like the snarl of an angry tiger passed his lips; the stick fell with a dull thud. The next moment all was dark again.

It seemed but an instant later when a heavy splash sounded from the lake, and a man's flying feet crashed among the undergrowth.

The wind whistled in fitful blasts through the bending trees, and the rain fell in torrents.

Midway between the lake and the carriage-drive to the stables Hilda Carrington was crouching. Her face was deathly pale. She had witnessed the blow which had killed her father, had heard the splash as of a body falling into the lake, but had been incapable of movement or speech. Now a moan burst from her lips, and she turned towards the Castle.

"Life is indeed ended for me!" she thought. "It was Victor who fired; his was the tall familiar figure. Ah, this is more than I can bear!"

The clatter of a horse's hoofs on the drive fell upon her ears, and, crouching back in the shadows, she waited for the rider to pass.

As the animal came into view, reared for an instant, and then dashed onwards, she saw that the horseman was none other than Victor Linton!

CHAPTER XXV.

HILDA regained her bed-room wet and bedraggled, the rain dripping from her hair. The servants had stared in wonder as she passed them on the way.

Mrs. Maxwell, her kind motherly face puckered and troubled, followed her speedily with some port-wine negus.

"My dear young lady, why will you do such things? You will catch your death of cold! But the very atmosphere of this place is enough to drive anybody mad!" she added, with unusual candour and considerable warmth.

She stirred the fire into a blaze, and begged Hilda to have her dripping hair dried by a maid.

"Please sit here, Miss Carrington, in the warmth of the fire, and drink your wine! I'm afraid you've got a chill—you look so strange!"

The girl's lips moved, but she did not speak.

All at once a disturbance was heard in the courtyard. Angry voices reverberated in the square, and then there was the sound of a pistol-shot. A fierce blast of wind shook the casements, and the rain-drops pattered like hail-stones against the window.

Hilda had started up, pale and trembling; some one was at the door.

"Don't trouble, my dear," the housekeeper said; "it is only one of the maids looking for me. Oh, dearie me, this place of mystery!"

But it was not a maid. Mrs. Maxwell's face turned red with amazement and indignation as she saw Bartlet standing before her.

"Oh, it's you—is it? I thought you knew your place better than to intrude here! I hope there's been no accident?" she added in a whisper.

"I must see Miss Carrington!" the butler answered sternly. "Yes, I have no doubt that she is indisposed, but that makes no difference; if she will not see me here, I must come into the room, Mrs. Maxwell, and you may hear all that passes. You object? My good woman, I have no reason to keep on my mask any longer! I am no more Bartlet

than you are; that gentleman is at the Antipodes long since. I am a detective, and my name is Perrin. I fancy that this will be no news to your mistress, thanks to Mr. Victor Linton!"

Some of the servants had crept in quietly after the detective, and in their midst was Mrs. Staples-Lambert.

"My reputation is ruined for ever!" she moaned. "To think that I should have come to a place like this—the home of criminals! But I will make Miss Spitfire pay for it!"

"Silence, woman!" the detective commanded. "And you"—to the servants—"go to your own quarters."

"You dare to call me 'woman,' you vulgar creature?" screamed Mrs. Staples-Lambert. "I'll report you to the authorities!"

Perrin followed Mrs. Maxwell into Hilda's room, and slammed the door behind him; then a look of pity softened the fierceness of his eyes. Miss Carrington was facing him intensely indignant and defiant, though, with trembling hands, she clung to the mantelpiece for support.

"I am sorry to trouble you," he began, "but I am bound to do my duty. Here is a note left by Captain Carrington on his table for you, miss, and I felt it my duty to open and read it."

"You dared?" she panted.

"It is not a matter of daring or impertinence, Miss Carrington," Perrin said respectfully. "I regard this as a clever blind; it was meant for me to read, and you know it! To come to the point, you had better tell me where the Captain is hiding away. The Rajah was caught while trying to escape. I had a dozen men posted about, and his Highness could not get away; he is now down-stairs. But he was not taken until he had nearly put a bullet through my head. We have also captured two foreign political spies at Llanberis railway-station to-night. Both the scoundrels were coming to Woodcroft Castle. The entire gang is now in the hands of the law—with the exception of Captain Carrington. If you still refuse to give me all the information in your power about him, I must reluctantly order a search of every room and closet in the Castle. It is a matter of impossibility for him to escape, and much unpleasantness will be saved——"

He broke off abruptly, as he saw that Hilda had opened her father's letter and, with an expression of despair in her eyes, was reading it.

"You are free to search as you please," she said at length. "I knew nothing of this—that my unhappy father resolved to kill himself."

"Can you name the enemy he alludes to?" Perrin said, watching her doubtfully.

Her dark eyes dilated, and there was a catch in her breath.

"Enemy? He had nothing but enemies!"

"One of his foes may have been one too many for him," remarked Perrin. "But we shall soon find out if that is the case; my men are searching the grounds and the lake now."

She started tremulously.

"And there may be a charge of murder against some one," he went on, with a smile. "You were observed, Miss Carrington, to leave the Castle shortly after Mr. Linton, and you were seen to return."

"And you may add," retorted Hilda fiercely, "that I have wished my father dead—that I have said it in your hearing—and, if you find his body, call me a murderess! Now go, and do your duty!"

She pointed to the door with a trembling finger, her eyes flashing.

The detective turned and retired.

"She looks capable of it too!" he thought regretfully. "And I can't forget how she has haunted the lake-side and asked questions about its depth. It wasn't Linton, because in watching him I lost sight of Carrington." He stamped his foot impatiently. "Poor girl—I'm really sorry for her!"

Half a dozen men with lanterns were searching all through the night, but not a trace of the Captain could be discovered. The lake was dragged in the gray hours of the morning, but without result. Every nook and cranny of the old Castle was carefully overhauled, but Carrington had vanished as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed him.

When Hilda heard of the detective's failure, her pulses thrilled with a sense of thankfulness. Her father's body was doubtless entangled among the thick growth of weeds at the bottom of the lake.

Soon after the breakfast-hour, Mrs. Maxwell, with a grave face, presented herself before her young mistress.

"They've given up the search, my dear," she said. "There's been six of them at it for twelve hours, and the Castle's just alive with men—newspaper-writers and policemen! I'm sure it's no place for you for

a while, Miss Carrington, and the servants are packing up to leave—every one of them!"

"I don't blame them," Hilda replied quietly. "Are you going too, Mrs. Maxwell?"

"What? And leave you, my lamb? Never—unless you send me away!" Her eyes filled with tears. "I was going to ask you if you would telegraph to Mr. Linton and ask his advice."

"No, no!" Hilda replied sharply; then she added, "We will leave Woodcroft Castle this morning if it can be arranged; I must go to London, leaving matters entirely in the hands of Mr. Molson. And I never wish to see this hateful place again!" Her eyes had lighted up with sudden hope. "Will you ring and send for Mr. Perrin, Mrs. Maxwell?"

Perrin came, and Hilda, meeting his searching gaze with perfect calmness, said to him—

"I have decided to go to London at once, if you will permit me to leave Woodcroft. The Castle will soon be deserted, and I have no wish to be left alone."

"I have no power to interfere with your movements, Miss Carrington. You will certainly suffer no hindrance at my hands!"—and the detective withdrew, completely baffled.

"This beats everything!" he said to himself. "I can have the young lady shadowed, of course; but I'll stake my word that Captain Carrington is not far off. As Mr. Linton has evidently given me away, I shall send him no further news, and he will get the benefit of my honest opinion!"

The moment he was gone Hilda gave orders for preparations for her departure to be made at once.

"It is just nine o'clock, Mrs. Maxwell," the girl said. "Can we get to Llanberis Station by twelve? There is a train for London about that hour."

"Do you wish me to go with you, Miss Carrington?"

Hilda hesitated.

"I shall be glad if you will ask no questions and pass no remarks upon my actions. And, if you have no family ties, I should like you to stay with me always, Mrs. Maxwell, for I have no friends."

"No friends?" The housekeeper opened her eyes wide, but she

checked the words that rose to her lips. "I have no family ties, my dear," she said. "My boy—my only child—is in India with his regiment, and my poor husband lies in Tooting cemetery. If I can be of use to you, it will be a pleasure I've never dreamed of. And I pray that Heaven will lift the cloud from over your young life!"

Hilda moved impatiently.

"Don't—don't!" There were tears in her eyes. "And now one word, Mrs. Maxwell! I never wish you to refer to Mr. Linton after this hour. We have had no quarrel, but I love him too well to drag him down to my own miserable level. I am the daughter of a criminal, and am leaving Woodcroft Castle so that I may never meet Mr. Linton again. We must waste no more time, as I have two calls to make; I cannot go without saying 'Good-bye' to the Rector and to Miss Lewis. They were both kind to me. Call the servants together, and tell them that each will receive three months' wages from Mr. Molson; I will give orders to that effect. And let them know that I am leaving immediately. The carriage at eleven—not a minute later!"

Mrs. Maxwell went from the room, and Hilda sat down at her desk. She had a letter to write—a farewell letter to Victor Linton!

CHAPTER XXVI.

The writing of the letter was not a difficult task. During the awful night that was just past Hilda had thought it over a hundred times, and it was based on the belief that her father's body would not be found; for the lake was deep, the bottom was covered with weeds, and, years before, a drunken coachman had reeled headlong into the water, and his body had not been found until the weeds were cut away by an expert diver.

Hilda prayed that her father's body might remain undisturbed for a little while, lest the man she loved should be suspected of having killed him. He had killed him, she believed, but the blow had been struck in self-defence. It was known that they had quarrelled bitterly.

The search in the lake had however been abandoned for the present. Several drags had been lost, and the quicksilver failed to indicate that the water contained a human body; in fact, Mr. Perrin felt certain that the Captain had not committed suicide, and that the letter which he had left for Miss Carrington was a mere "blind."

"A babyish trick!" he decided. "But I must keep his daughter under close observation. She will probably join him in London, if he has, by some miraculous piece of luck, actually got away."

So Hilda wrote this letter.

"Victor, my darling—The end has come, and I am going away for ever. You must know that marriage between us now is impossible. Filled with fear for your safety, after my father's threats I broke the promise I made to you last night, and left my room. I saw you and him at the lake-side, and then you rode away on Black Bess. I am writing this after a night of anxious thought, and—must I confess it?—hours of sobbing. But it is over, and I am perfectly calm. I do not blame you in my heart. You struck my unhappy father in self-defence—you are too brave and chivalrous to take advantage of an old man. He shot at you—I heard the report—and he might have killed you. I acquit you of all, save one thing—Why did you seek him? Why did

you not go straight away from the Castle, as I thought that you would have done? I am asking questions which I shall give you no opportunity of answering, because you have looked upon my face for the last time on earth. Sometimes I shall think of you, and of the mine, and pray for your happiness.

"Mr. Molson will be instructed to sell Woodcroft—even if he can obtain only one half its value. I hate it, loathe it, and nobody likes me here! Once more, Victor, I bitterly regret that Sir John Carrington ever thought of me with kindly feelings! From that very hour our happiness has been blighted—yours and mine.

"I wonder how I can write this cold-blooded letter—at least, it seems cold-blooded to me now. Perhaps it is because it has been carefully thought out, and that my nerves have, in a manner, become torpid. Throughout the long and horrible night I have been quivering with pain; I have wept bitter tears; I have cried aloud in my anguish, but now I can laugh, even if my laughter is mirthless. The detectives have not found my father's body, and I don't think that they will find it for days and days. This is good news, but it may be stale news when you read it here. I have only one favour to ask of you, Victor, and that is that you will give my poor father decent burial when you think that it is safe to do so. And it has come to this! Good-bye, Victor dear, for ever.

"HILDA."

She finished the letter hastily, for her deadened nerves were becoming sensitive again. Then, having sealed it up, she put it into the pocket of her dress. No other hand must touch it, no other eye see it, until it was committed to the post.

She walked to the window, and a deep quivering sigh passed her lips. How glorious was the face of nature after the night of storm! The heavens were brilliantly blue, and the earth sparkled with diamond-drops.

Two men crossed the courtyard—big broad-shouldered fellows.

Hilda left the window, remembering that she had not yet spoken to Mrs. Carrington about the future. She half regretted that she had not been kinder to her father's wife. How could she approach her? And must she tell her the truth?

While gathering together the things which were to be packed, she

thought over the matter. If Mrs. Maxwell would undertake it—but no—that would not be a graceful or a kindly act!

The clocks struck the hour of ten. How swiftly time was flying! Mrs. Maxwell and two female servants came into the room, the housekeeper red and perspiring. A pile of luggage had been got out into the corridor.

"I have spoken to the servants, Miss Carrington," she said in an undertone, "and they are very grateful to you for your kindness. Quite half of them, who were faithful to Sir John, will be ready to come back here when you return. I have told some of them they will be required to stay to take care of the place, but that they must look to Mr. Molson for instructions."

"Yes," assented Hilda.

"My own things are packed," Mrs. Maxwell went on, "if you are ready, miss?"

Then Hilda sought Mrs. Carrington.

The unhappy woman's face was red with weeping, but her eyes flashed resentfully at sight of her step-daughter.

"I hope you're satisfied now," she began—"now you've driven him away! He wished me 'Good-bye' last night, but I didn't think he was really goin'."

A fresh outburst of sobbing cut short her speech, and she rocked herself to and fro.

"It is better so, Mrs. Carrington," Hilda said gently. "He has gone to—to avoid being arrested. You understand? And I want to know what you intend doing."

Mrs. Carrington dried her tears, and looked defiantly at her step-daughter.

"I suppose you want to turn me out, now——"

"I am not here to discuss such questions! I am going away myself, immediately."

"Well, I'm not! Where's my poor dear to find me when he wants to?"

"Of course, you are quite at liberty to remain at the Castle—until it is sold. And I intend giving the lawyer instructions to see that you are well provided for."

"Goin' to sell Woodcroft over my head!" sobbed Mrs. Carrington.

Hilda withdrew, the woman's taunting voice ringing in her ears.

"I sha'n't go for nobody but my husband—not if you do sell Woodcroft—so there!"

A feverish desire for haste now possessed the girl. If Victor should come? Oh, she could not face the ordeal!

The luggage was despatched to the railway-station in a cart, and Hilda said "Good-bye" to the servants, who had gathered in the entrance-hall.

Perrin approached Mrs. Maxwell.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked. "An ugly break-up this!" "And who is responsible for it? I call you an underhand sneak—pretending to be a respectable butler while you were nothing but a common policeman! I have no desire ever to see you again!"

The detective laughed.

"I've the greatest respect for you, ma'am!" he said, bowing.

"And my contempt for you couldn't be measured, sir!"

Mrs. Maxwell sailed after her young mistress, and Perrin hastened forward to open the carriage-door.

"You and the rest of them have done all this very cleverly, Miss Carrington," he whispered, looking full into Hilda's eyes. "But be careful! At first I was angry at being hoodwinked; but, for the sake of the good old name and the confidence the late Sir John reposed in me, I won't have you shadowed. I've secured the arch-conspirator—the master mind—and the rest of his confederates, so I will be satisfied. Good morning!"

Hilda inclined her head slightly, speech being impossible, and the carriage drove away. Had Perrin discovered the truth?

The coachman had been ordered to drive rapidly, and, as they were whirled along, a feeling akin to desolation crept into Hilda's heart. As she beheld the peak of Snowdon, the noble forest-trees, the undulating meadow-land, the gleaming expanse of a wide-spreading lake, she realised that she was putting behind her for ever the past with its shadows and its sunshine.

Soon the town of Llanberis came into view, and Hilda decided to call first upon Miss Lewis. When the carriage swept into the quiet little town the shopkeepers came to their doors and watched her

curiously. Then she noted that they gathered together in groups, and she knew that she was being discussed.

The carriage stopped before Miss Lewis's shop, and Miss Lewis herself ran out, her kindly face sympathetic but curious.

Hilda took her hand.

"I am going away," she said briefly; "and I have called to say 'Good-bye' to you, and to thank you for your kindness to me." Her eyes darkened with tears. "No—I won't come in; I leave by the twelve o'clock train for London."

"I am so sorry, Miss Carrington! Are you sure that there is nothing I can do for you?"

"Quite sure!"

"I wish that you had come in!" Miss Lewis glanced angrily at a group of inquisitive men and women standing on the other side of the street. "These people are all agog with curiosity. I know how galling it must be to your sensitive nature."

"I am past caring, I think. But I have always been more or less of a pariah! And I love the wild beauty of Llanberis, although I hate it. Paradoxical, isn't it?" She smiled wanly. "I have only discovered it this morning."

"But you will not be gone for long?"—"For ever!"

Miss Lewis snatched at her hand impulsively.

"I am so sorry!" She did not think for one moment that Hilda's words were true. "You are anxious to be gone; this terrible trouble has been too much for you. I shall see Mr. Linton before he follows you, I am sure."

She waved her hand as the carriage rolled away, and her eyes were moist.

"Poor child!" she murmured. "And just when happiness appeared to be within reach!"

The people on the opposite side of the way stared after Miss Carrington, and then the group began to disperse. By way of showing her detestation of such heartless gossips, Miss Lewis slammed her shop-door behind her as she went in.

Hilda soon reached the Rectory. How often she had sought consolation there from the honest-hearted clergyman! He had always been her friend, though at times he had severely reproved her.

The slatternly maid-of-all-work opened the door, and she stared with wide-open eyes at Miss Carrington.

"La, Miss Carrington, for sure! Is it the Rector you be wanting to see? Come into his study, please—'cause he's got a visitor in the drawin'-room." The maid grinned from ear to ear. "An' the missis is there as well. And that's the reason I have to answer the door while I'm peeling the 'taters with hands like these!"

Hilda hesitated.

"I have no time to spare," she began thoughtfully.

"Neither has the Rector for the party he's got there," the girl returned with a sly wink. "He won't be two minutes, miss. Now there's them brats up to mischief—things has gone so quiet!"

The maid-of-all-work shambled away, and Hilda sat down in the study, the door being left slightly ajar. The indistinct murmur of voices reached her ears; then there was the sound of an opening door, and she heard the voice of the Rector, speaking angrily.

"I don't care, Miss Morgan—I utterly refuse to discuss malicious gossip with you and Mrs. Jarvis! I quite appreciate the fact that I am a mere figure-head in my own household—I am a meek and enduring man for the sake of peace—but I will not hear another word about that poor girl! You both appear to rejoice in her misfortunes."

"She was always a perfect little vixen, and deserves all that she will get!" snapped Miss Morgan. "When under my care she used to defy me. And, as for Mr. Linton, the man who has turned her silly head, he is the sort of creature I most abhor—a male flirt!"

"Andrew," Mrs. Jarvis chimed in icily, "you have insulted me in the presence of Miss Morgan! Is that wicked creature to cause trouble between husband and wife? I told you long ago what she was—an impudent, ugly, saucy vixen! I hope that she will get sent to prison with her thief of a father! We can do without such creatures in Llanberis. And, if the truth were known, old Sir John Carrington was no better than he should have been."

"This is most unseemly!" Hilda noted that there was a tremor in the Rector's voice.

"Yes—you go against your own wife to defend that hateful girl! They are bad, root and branch!"

"I am afraid that the fact of Miss Carrington's having lived at Harlech School will do me an irreparable injury. Several of my girls have already given notice; and the scandal is not half out yet." Miss Morgan spoke in a plaintive tone. "I hope that she will not settle in this neighbourhood—I have a wholesome horror of the creature—she is really uncanny!"

With glowing cheeks and flashing eyes, Hilda rose silently from her seat. Should she face her traducer on the spot?

"I will not sell the Castle now," she determined—"I will not gratify my enemies! I will come back to Llanberis some day, and they shall feel my power! The dear old Rector defends me—I shall not forget his disinterested kindness . . . I can't see him after all—the time is too short, and I will not meet these women—I think that I should do something desperate if I did!"

The voices in the drawing-room were lowered again, but Hilda heard Miss Morgan saying "Good morning" to Mrs. Jarvis.

"I will drop in to tea this afternoon if you are disengaged," the schoolmistress said.

"Yes, do, my dear! It is a relief to have somebody to speak to after a day of worry and toil with the children; and Mr. Jarvis has no sympathy with me. Don't forget to bring all the news!"

Hilda came out of the study, and let herself out at the front-door. She wondered if they could get away unnoticed. Of course the maid-of-all-work would inform her master and mistress of her visit, but——

Hilda sprang into the carriage.

"To the railway-station!" was her order to the coachman.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THERE was nearly half an hour to spare when Hilda Carrington and Mrs. Maxwell reached the railway station, and to Hilda it seemed endless.

She posted her letter to Victor Linton, and when it dropped into the box she bade farewell to every hope.

The loiterers on the platform stared at her curiously; and she was quite sure that a policeman was standing at her elbow when she purchased two first-class tickets to London. But it did not matter; Perrin had made her some vague promise, and she had an idea that he was her friend.

At last the train steamed away, and then Hilda's only care was that they would have to change at Carnarvon. It was possible that she would attract notice there also.

"Don't trouble about anything, Miss Carrington," Mrs. Maxwell advised as the train steamed slowly into Carnarvon station. "I will see that the luggage is transferred to the London van, and arrange with the guard to give us a compartment to ourselves."

"Thank you!" Hilda answered. She was already planning her future movements. It would not be wise to stay in London one hour longer than was absolutely necessary, as Victor would perhaps follow her there.

They had not long to wait at Carnarvon before the London express thundered in.

Hilda took the precaution while they were waiting to telegraph to Mr. Molson as follows—

"I shall arrive at Euston about eight o'clock this evening. Can you send some one to meet me? If possible, engage rooms at hotel for myself and lady-companion. I must consult you upon matters of vital importance.—HILDA CARRINGTON."

When the train rolled into Euston Hilda had fully decided upon a course of action with which Mrs. Maxwell also was well pleased.

"I care for Mr. Linton too well to consent to drag him down to my own level," was the girl's explanation, "and I cannot face the world after the exposure of my father's career. Therefore I intend travelling for a few years, until I am forgotten; and, to make my identification the less likely, I may assume another name."

Mrs. Maxwell acquiesced, but there was a meaning smile on her kindly face. Mr. Victor Linton was not the man to take matters calmly, and Miss Carrington would alter her mind by-and-by.

When they alighted from the train a gentleman pushed his way through the crowd and spoke to Miss Carrington. It was Mr. Molson. He regarded the girl with mingled pity and concern.

"I have obeyed your instructions," he said, his keen eyes never leaving her face, "though they are of a rather surprising nature. If you are not too tired I should like to have a long talk with you to-night."

"That is my wish too," Hilda responded.

"Very good! This is our carriage. One moment! I must give instructions about your luggage."

The lawyer hurried away, but was soon back.

"Your things will follow us immediately. Your hotel is the Beaconsfield, just off Euston Square; I did not think it wise to engage rooms too far from the station."

"Euston Square!" Hilda reflected to herself, with a pang at her heart. Victor's home was in Euston Square.

The lawyer, having assisted them into the carriage, entered himself, and they were driven away. None of them spoke until the vehicle pulled up before the Beaconsfield Hotel. It was a quiet, unpretentious-looking house.

"I will leave you for an hour," Mr. Molson said, still regarding Hilda with that intent gaze of his; "and when I return you will be fully prepared, I hope, to enlighten me concerning your flight from Llanberis."

Then Mr. Molson turned and spoke to the hall-porter, raised his hat to Miss Carrington, and then walked slowly away.

A private sitting-room had been engaged by Mr. Molson for the ladies' use, and also a maid-servant to attend upon them. The lawyer appeared to have anticipated their every requirement. An appetising

supper was served, and, both the travellers being hungry after the long journey from Llanberis, they enjoyed it.

No sooner was the table cleared than Mr. Molson was announced; he had evidently been waiting in the hotel. There was a look of perplexity on his face as he entered the room.

"Well, Miss Carrington," he began, glancing questioningly in the direction of Mrs. Maxwell, "you will excuse me if I ask you to come to the point at once! Or would you rather defer the interview until morning?"

"Oh, no!" Hilda answered quickly and with perfect composure, although her lips were pale. "And I wish Mrs. Maxwell to be present; I have no secrets from her."

The lawyer bowed and took a seat.

There was an awkward pause while Hilda was striving to still the aching pain at her heart.

"Your telegram was rather surprising," Mr. Molson observed; "and I may add that I received one from Mr. Linton just before leaving the office this evening."

"Indeed?"—faintly articulated.

"But there," he went on rapidly—"I am only making things harder for you! Tell me what you wish to tell me in your own way, and then I shall know how to act. Mr. Linton telegraphed that you would probably come to me, and asked me not to lose sight of you. He is almost certain to follow the telegram by the first train. Naturally, all this is very bewildering. If it is a mere lovers' quarrel, I would rather not interfere——"

Hilda waved her hand in the old imperious way.

"It is no lovers' quarrel, Mr. Molson! I am at present under a cloud of shame; the name I bear will soon be a bye-word. You are probably acquainted with all that took place at Woodcroft last night?"

"Through the medium of the newspapers—yes. The Indian Prince and his confederates have been trapped, but Captain Vane Carrington has tricked the detectives in a marvellous manner."

"Don't!" Hilda's face was deathly pale, and her hands shook. By a supreme effort she recovered herself, and continued, "I have fully decided that I cannot marry Mr. Linton, and I have told him so by

letter. I cannot live at Woodcroft, and am going abroad, where no one can find me. I shall change my name; Hilda Carrington must be dead to the world. I am in London to ask you to undertake the entire control of my business affairs; to you alone shall I confide my movements, and I expect you to give me your promise to respect my confidence."

Mr. Molson drummed on the table with his fingers.

"A lawyer has as many secrets as a priest," he answered, "and guards them as faithfully. Yours is a Utopian notion, but you are a young lady of strong character and determination." He smiled as he looked up at the ceiling. He was pleased, for had he not already endeavoured to convince Miss Carrington of the folly of marrying a penniless scribbler? Now she had decided of her own free will to abandon the idea.

"I heartily approve of your plan," he said gravely, after a pause. "There will be a great scandal, and for weeks the papers will be alive with the affair—grossly exaggerated, of course. It would be painful to you—horribly painful—to be here while the exposure was going on, and I willingly undertake to do what you ask. Your wishes will be my law, and my advice concerning your travels—in the initial stage, at least—may prove of value, though I have every confidence in the experience and good sense of Mrs. Maxwell. Now, will you state your wishes briefly, Miss Carrington?"

Hilda unfolded her plans rapidly and concisely.

"Thank you! It is all very simple. I will report to you from time to time, as you make your whereabouts known to me. Your idea of demolishing the old Castle at some future time is, I think, an excellent one. In a year or two the present sensation will have been entirely forgotten; people die off or move away. Nothing has been proved against Captain Carrington so far, and he may never be caught."

"No—he will never be caught," Hilda murmured incautiously.

The lawyer glanced at her swiftly, and his lips tightened.

"You are not assisting him to escape, Miss Carrington? If you are, I dare not be mixed up in the business."

"No—I am not. You may rely upon that, Mr. Molson."

He could not help being impressed by the sadness of her face.

"A remarkable girl!" he thought. "I had not formed a correct

estimate of her character, or I should never have recommended Mrs. Staples-Lambert!"

"You must leave London as early as possible," he said aloud, "if you wish to avoid Mr. Linton. He will be at my office early to-morrow. Ah, I see that you are in earnest! Well, I would suggest that you make a start for New York, and spend a year or so in America. You will be free from danger there, and will make plenty of friends. Just at this time of the year the usual steamers are crammed, and therefore I would advise you to go—not from Liverpool or from Southampton, but from Glasgow. You will have a longer voyage, it is true, but you will also have greater freedom, while the possibility of meeting people who may recognise you will be very remote indeed."

He looked at her questioningly.

"I am satisfied to leave the preliminary arrangements entirely in your hands, Mr. Molson."

"Thank you!" He bowed, well pleased; it was the first time that this self-willed young lady had deferred to him in any way. He glanced at his watch; it was nearly eleven o'clock.

"I shall be compelled to devote the whole of to-morrow to the arrangement of your affairs, Miss Carrington," he concluded, rising; "and you must not expect me here again until the evening, by which time everything will be cut and dried. By the way, what name will you adopt while travelling? It does not matter particularly, but—well, suppose you use that of 'Alice Stansfield'? It is better than 'Smith' or 'Brown.'"

"Oh, that will do very well!"

"And a pretty name too!" Mrs. Maxwell remarked.

The lawyer made a note of it in his pocket-book, and then drew on his gloves.

"I thank you for your confidence in me, Miss Carrington; and I assure you that your interests will be my interests. I only ask you to follow my advice, if you earnestly desire the success of your excellent scheme, until you are safely aboard an Atlantic liner. And I would especially advise you not to venture into the streets or expose yourself at the windows to-morrow. So many people pass here going to and from Euston station! Good night!"

A few minutes later Hilda and Mrs. Maxwell retired to their bed-rooms.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THOROUGHLY tired out, mentally and bodily, Hilda slept a long and dreamless sleep. As she opened her eyes the noise of busy London fell upon her ears, and a shaft of sunlight was slanting in through the window.

She rose and dressed hastily. It was nine o'clock; she never remembered to have slept so late before.

She heard Mrs. Maxwell at the door.

"Breakfast will be ready at half-past nine, in the sitting-room, Miss Carrington."

"Thank you," Hilda answered.

She went down-stairs very soon afterwards, and found Mrs. Maxwell reading a morning paper, which trembled in her grasp.

"What is it?" the girl questioned. "I am not afraid to hear—ah, I think that I know the worst already, and my nerves are dead!"

Mrs. Maxwell did not quite understand this speech. But Miss Carrington said so many things that were enigmatical!

"It is only about the Indian, my dear—Prince Ali Narain. He shot himself yesterday while being taken to prison by two detectives. Captain Carrington appears to have got clean away. There is only a sympathetic reference to yourself."

Hilda read the paragraph listlessly. The Rajah was dead, and perhaps it was better so.

After breakfast she sat at the window, which commanded a view of the street below, not unmindful of Mr. Molson's warning. She looked towards Euston Square, and wondered which of the houses was the home of the Lintons. There was only the lonely mother there now, for Victor had told her that his sister and her husband had set up housekeeping in quite a humble way on their own account. But Marian visited her mother every day.

"I had looked forward so to knowing Marian!" Hilda thought, with a sigh. "Victor was never tired of speaking of her goodness. And

how he loved his old chum, Harry Mayhew, Marian's husband! But life has ended for me!"

The people in the street became blurred to her eyes, and the noise of the passing vehicles seemed far away. Would the morning last for ever? And what was Victor doing at that moment? Again the vision at the lake-side rose before her eyes. Victor's had been the hand to give her father his death-blow. Even that thought might have been endurable had the blow been delivered in self-defence; but had he not afterwards cast the body of her father into the lake? Horrible—horrible! He must have been insane with fury!

Hilda's blood seemed to turn icy cold. Even through the mist which veiled her eyes she saw and recognised the form of her lover on the opposite side of the way. He was striding along at a rapid pace, looking straight before him, and jostling people aside in a manner which caused them to look back and mutter threateningly.

In a moment he was gone! Then Hilda held out both hands, and, murmuring "Victor, Victor!" slipped from her chair in a swoon.

* * * * * *

That day seemed almost interminable to Hilda.

Mr. Molson came again to the hotel in the evening. The lawyer looked self-satisfied. He had had a stormy interview with Victor Linton, in which he had proved himself master of the situation. Miss Carrington had not been to his office, he had told the young man, and, if she did come, he did not consider it incumbent upon him to apprise Mr. Linton of her movements.

"Probably she has very good reasons for breaking off the engagement," he had added. "And I don't think that you have reason to grumble, considering the benefit you have already secured from the acquaintance—if we may call it so."

Victor was amazed, even in his anger, at this impolitic speech. Mr. Molson disliked the young man thoroughly, because he had defeated him once or twice when they had been opposed to each other in court. It had been a bitter experience for the sedate family solicitor to be chaffed in public by a mere youth. Linton had given up the law now, but Mr. Molson would never forget or forgive.

"What do you mean, sir? Don't you see that I am beside myself with anxiety? Miss Carrington——"

Mr. Molson held up a hand.

"Is evidently repenting of her choice! I know nothing more, only that you have to thank her for financing your precious coal-mine. Growcott never had a shilling in his life! Ask him! If you succeed, I suppose that you will repay the loan to me? Good morning!"

Angry, amazed, and mortified, Victor Linton had departed.

Mr. Molson used his own discretion however as to what he told to Miss Carrington of the interview.

"As I expected," he said, raising his eyebrows, "Mr. Linton called at my office in quest of you. I told him nothing, and he went away in high dudgeon. I was too busy to pay much attention to him. I have done a great deal upon my own responsibility, Miss Carrington—I have booked your berths—yours and Mrs. Maxwell's—for New York. The ship, the *Anchoria*, of Glasgow, sails to-morrow evening at six o'clock. Have I done right? She is not exactly a first-class vessel, and is rather slow; but you will find the accommodation excellent. One of my lady-clients speaks very highly of the *Anchoria*."

"I am entirely in your hands for the present."

"You are satisfied, then? In that case, we must leave Euston to-morrow morning by the very first train—5.15, I believe—very early, but, in the circumstances, we have no choice. I will go with you as far as Glasgow, and see you safely on board the ship."

He glanced questioningly at Hilda.

"That will suit me exactly," she said.

Mr. Molson produced from his brief-bag various papers for her signature, and in exchange gave her notes and gold to the amount of five hundred pounds.

"I will remit money as you require it, and in any way you desire—shall we say by banker's draft?" he said. "And I will send you a weekly or monthly report as to the business at Woodcroft."

The matter was thus settled, and there was little or nothing more to say.

Orders were given for a very early breakfast, and Hilda and Mrs. Maxwell retired for a short night's rest.

At four o'clock the next morning they were breakfasting, and at half-past four a cab rattled up to the Beaconsfield Hotel, Mr. Molson, with a hand-bag and a large travelling-rug, alighting from it.

The lawyer was gratified to find that Hilda and her companion were ready, and he gave instructions for their luggage to be sent on to the station.

"The station is so near," he remarked, "that it will not hurt us to walk. And I wish to keep an eye upon the luggage, so we will follow it. These hotel-porters have a knack of arriving with their trucks only half a minute before the train starts. That would not suit us by any means, as the 5.15 is the great newspaper train, and a single hitch would cause you to lose the ship."

The porter was sent on ahead with his load.

They passed through Euston Square, and Mr. Molson pointed out the Lintons' home.

"Old Mr. Linton was once one of the most trusted men in the profession," he remarked. "Of course it is pretty well understood why he vanished! Take care!"

They heard the sound of horses' hoofs behind them, and a great red van dashed by, loaded with newspaper parcels. Others followed in quick succession.

The express was waiting in the station. The engine-driver was busy polishing the bright parts of his beloved "iron horse," from the boiler of which clouds of steam were issuing with a hissing sound, and scores of men were filling the vans with newspaper parcels. What a pandemonium it all was—the hoarse cries of men, the rapid clatter of horses' feet, and the heavy booming rumble of the vans!

After a while a few cabs arrived with passengers, all of whom Mr. Molson sharply scrutinised.

"She is not being followed," he murmured, "though I half expected it."

He took their tickets, and placed his charges in a first-class compartment.

"You would like to be alone?" he asked considerately. "Besides, I must smoke; I will travel in the next compartment."

The journey was absolutely uneventful, and they arrived at Glasgow at half-past four o'clock in the afternoon.

"It is all rush and hurry," Mr. Molson said apologetically; "but it cannot be helped. The *Anchoria* sails in about an hour, so we must not waste a moment, Miss Carrington. While I get a couple of cabs—

one for the luggage and one for ourselves—you will have time for a cup of tea at the refreshment-room. Once you are on board you will have nearly two weeks of leisure."

He hastened away, and ten minutes later they were being driven through dirty and desolate-looking streets to the docks.

The sky had become overcast, and a fine rain was falling.

Hilda gazed at it all with disconsolate eyes.

"The voyage will do you a world of good!" said Mr. Molson, looking at her fixedly. "It is not too late however to draw back, if you wish."

"Oh, no—oh, no!" She laughed hysterically. "I am only horribly tired!"

The fly stopped, and soon they were mingling with a crowd of people. The luggage, labelled with the shipping company's papers, was trundled on board.

From the vessel's smoke-stack there rose an inky-black cloud.

"We must say 'Good-bye' here, Miss—Stansfield," Mr. Molson said. 'I almost forgot to use your new name! I will wait on the quay until the vessel sails. The stewardess will give you all attention, I am sure."

He shook hands with Hilda, and raised his hat to Mrs. Maxwell. Then they passed the barrier, and were standing on the steamer's deck.

The steward approached them at once.

"First cabin? Stansfield—Maxwell? This way, if you please. This is all the luggage you will require? Thank you! The remainder will go into the hold."

They went below, under the forward deck, and the stewardess came forward smiling. Then the siren sounded an ear-splitting blast, and the *Anchoria* had started on another voyage to New York.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Captain Vane Carrington was not dead—far from it. The blow which Prince Ali Narain struck him had glanced from his head to his shoulder, but such was its force that he had dropped senseless. The next thing he knew was that he was in the water, and he began to struggle for life.

He scrambled to the side of the lake, which happened to be at its shallowest here; then he paused to regain his breath, listening the while with all the cunning of a madman, as he was at that moment.

The trees creaked and groaned in the grasp of a savage wind, and the rain was falling in heavy drops.

He passed one hand over his aching head, and felt that it was bleeding, and, setting his teeth hard, he anathematised the Rajah.

"He has escaped me! But I have escaped him too!" The second thought set him thinking, and he added—"Ah, if I could only escape them all!"

As he crept towards the tower, he wondered if they would be likely to search there. And would his nerves stand the horrors of that awful place? Yes—better a dozen ghosts than the police—if ghosts there were. He reached his hiding-place, but, while he was crouching there, he was startled by the sudden scampering of scores of tiny feet within a short distance of him, and he shuddered. An army of rats! He could not stand that!

He sprang up and darted off, running at a great speed, until he was so far away that the lights of the Castle seemed mere twinkling sparks.

"They shall never capture me alive!" he said to himself.

Then he heard the clang of a horse's hoofs on the rocky way, and he slunk behind a tree.

"Great heavens—they are here!" he murmured.

The horseman flew past, and Carrington saw that it was Victor Linton. He shouted; but the wind mocked at him!

"He would help me for Hilda's sake. Why have I not trusted him more? Linton—Linton! Help!"

He held his face up to the cool pelting rain. How refreshing it was! Oh, if he could have lived his life over again! If he could only have one more chance!

"Liberty—liberty!" he cried aloud. "I must not—I will not lose my liberty! Death first! I will follow Linton. I will go to Nant Glaslyn Valley, and hide there until he comes. He will help me—he will help me for Hilda's sake!"

He went onward at a swift pace, until the dim lights of Llanberis twinkled through the falling rain. Ah, it would be madness to expose himself, to thrust his head into the lion's mouth! There were police posted everywhere.

As he turned into a deep and narrow pass to the right of Llanberis, he thought how fortunate it was that the night was dark, that the rain fell and the wind blew so boisterously.

He chose the most unfrequented ways, pausing but rarely until he stood in the shadow of the great engine-house at Nant Glaslyn, until he saw the immense gaunt frames that spanned the mines, the frames that held the pulleys which were to make thousands of revolutions a day, bringing with every turn wealth for Victor Linton. The ground was littered with iron hoops, steel rails, baulks of timber, pieces of machinery, and a hundred-and-one other things, some of which Carrington had stumbled over in his flight. So work was begun in real earnest, he thought.

How horribly cold it was out there in the bleak wind and the rain! His blood was cooling after his fierce exertions, and he shivered, his teeth chattering. He had run and walked a long, long distance—fifteen or sixteen miles—for he had not come by the direct way, and he was tired, while his temples throbbed with a fearful pain. He was drenched to the skin too; and his left arm was almost powerless from the effect of the Rajah's savage blow.

Having struggled to the door of the engine-house, he found it locked. His senses seemed to be leaving him—he dropped to his knees. He would creep to the furnace-holes and die there, out of the rain. The big boilers were under repair, and there was no fire in the furnaces. Why had he not thought of this shelter before? He chuckled to

himself as he crept on his hands and knees right under one of the boilers into the ash-pit. Ah, how warm it was! Very soon he was asleep.

* * * * * *

The morning broke brilliantly. Captain Carrington awoke half delirious. His thirst was almost unendurable, and he had not strength to drag himself out of the ash-pit. When would the workmen arrive? he wondered. A hopeless feeling took possession of him The sun was just peeping over the hills, so it must be after six o'clock.

"They will find me in a little while," he muttered, "and I could not resist if I would! It is all up with me."

He held his breath, and his heart beat faster, for the sounds of a horse's measured tread vibrated on the quiet morning air. He shrank into the farthest corner of his hiding-place, his eyes distended with terror.

Nearer came the horse and its rider, and Carrington uttered a faint cry of joy.

"Black Bess," he gasped—"and Victor Linton! My luck has not deserted me yet!"

He saw Linton dismount and lead the mare to the stables which had been erected for the use of the pit horses.

A minute or so later the young man re-appeared, and Captain Carrington crawled out of the ash-pit.

"Victor!" he called.

Linton shrank back in blank amazement as he turned and saw the Captain, who was a pitiable object.

"Great heavens, Carrington—what are you doing here?"

"You can see for yourself, Linton," was the feeble answer. "I think that I was mad last night. Anyhow I got a notion into my head that I must kill somebody, and the Rajah suggested you. His power is extraordinary at times, but I overcame that, and decided to shoot him instead. We met by the lake-side by appointment, and he hit me over the head. The next thing I knew I was struggling for life in the water—no doubt he had left me there for dead. Then I resolved to fly from Woodcroft, to escape arrest by the police, and the stormy night favoured me."

Linton was too overcome to speak. His heart melted with pity for

the unhappy man before him as he reflected that the police were now probably scouring the country in search of him.

Captain Carrington read the expression in Victor's eyes, and smiled grimly.

"Now what are you going to do for me, for Hilda's sake?" he said, adding pathetically after a pause, "You don't bear me any animosity, do you?"

"Good Heaven, no! I am sorry for you—awfully sorry—and my anger against you was caused by the trouble and disgrace you have brought into your daughter's life!" He roused himself suddenly. "There is a cask of ale in the engine-house," he said. "Will you have some? It is all I can offer yet."

"It will taste like nectar—my throat is like a lime-kiln!"

Victor assisted the Captain to his feet, then unlocked the engine door, and they went in. The young man rinsed out a glass with some ale from a large wooden cask, re-filled it, and handed it to Carrington, who drank the contents at one draught.

"New life in my veins! Another glassful, and then we'll talk! I don't suppose there is any time to waste? When do your men start work?"

"Eight o'clock. I should not have been here myself until that time if I had not borrowed Black Bess last night. I usually drive over with my partner. But about yourself? How are you to escape? The moment your flight is discovered the fact will be flashed all over Britain!"

There was a brief silence.

"It's of no use going any farther," Carrington said, with quiet conviction. "Can't you hide me here—in the mine, say? I could mingle with the workmen. I know that it is selfish to drag you into the business, but what am I to do?"

Linton was startled at the suggestion. He paced the floor for a while with puckered brows; then he gazed over the rolling country. If he could shield the unhappy man! He gave no thought to himself.

"You must cut off your moustache and crop your hair close," he said. "Here are a pair of shears. Take off your coat, vest, and collar, and I will burn them. In this chest are some overalls belonging to my partner; he wears them to protect his clothes when descending the

mine. There are several sets, and I will tell him that I have borrowed one. Fortunately fresh men are constantly arriving from various parts of the country, and little, if any, notice will be taken of you. We cannot commence operations in the mine for a couple of weeks yet, so you must pretend to make yourself useful in the works—sawing timber or anything."

Carrington looked as relieved as if he had been reprieved from death.

"Trust me for playing my part!" he said huskily. "And when it is safe for me to move——"

Linton took the shears, and Carrington leaned back in his chair, and absolutely laughed when the moustache which had been one of his chief adornments was cut off. Then his silky hair fell about his shoulders as it was cropped.

"The scar on your cheek?" suggested Linton. "You must smear your face with dirt. Now toss off your clothes and put on these."

Within fifteen minutes "Handsome Carrington" was completely transformed into "Bill Dodgson, labourer."

"There is half a chance," Victor said. "I defy your own wife to know you now! By nine o'clock fifty or sixty men will be at the works. Then I shall have to explain to my partner that you are a workman whom I specially wish to have engaged, for Mr. Growcott is absolute manager of the mine."

CHAPTER XXX.

Mr. Growcott arrived a few minutes in advance of the men; and, whatever he may have thought when he viewed "Bill Dodgson," his shrewd face betrayed nothing.

"A man in whom you are interested, Mr. Linton? That is enough for me; I will find him something to do. I would suggest a light job if he has been long out of work. You have borrowed a set of my overalls too?" He laughed. "Dodgson, go to the tool-shed and get a shovel. A gang of men are going to level those mounds to-day preparatory to laying a short line of rails; and you can work with them."

"Who is he?" Mr. Growcott asked when "Dodgson" was gone.

"Miss Carrington's father," Victor answered promptly.

"Great heavens!" The manager of the mine was visibly agitated. "I will look after him, Linton! I owe my chance in life to Miss Carrington! I have good news," he continued cheerfully, leaving Victor to make what he could of his enigmatical last remark. "The 'chief' has more men coming to-day, and we shall positively explore the mine within a week! I long to see the colliers go down in the cage, to see the rope reeling off the drum, to hear the buzzing of the machinery! Fortunately we have no water in the shaft to cope with. It is perfectly dry. Had it been sunk half a mile nearer to Llanberis, your father would have been a millionnaire now. I know just where the great seam lies."

The workmen began to arrive—engine-fitters, carpenters, and labourers—but little or no notice was taken of "Bill Dodgson."

Victor Linton, seated in the office with his partner, was feverish and ill-at-ease.

"I had no intention of staying at the works so long," he said at last. His eyes were turned in the direction of "Bill Dodgson," who had joined a gang of labourers. "I came early to tell you that I had news

of my father, and to write him a cheerful letter concerning our prospects, if you advised it."

"I do advise it, Linton—strongly, strongly!" He did not raise his eyes from the plans on which he was working. "And, if you are riding over to Woodcroft, you can relieve Miss Carrington's mind; for of course the murder is out before now!"

Victor rose suddenly, his face paling.

"The police are here!" he said. "A couple of mounted men!"

"The dickens they are! Well, let 'em come! Go on writing your letter, Linton. 'Bill Dodgson' is a cool hand; he's speaking to one of them now."

The officers walked their horses up to the office-door, dismounted, and tied the animals up.

"What are you after?" cried Growcott.

"You don't mind us having a look round the works, sir?"

"Oh, no—certainly not!"

The officers wandered about among the workmen for a while, then they returned to the office and drank some of Growcott's ale and lighted two of Victor Linton's cigars.

"What are you after, if it is not an impertinent question?" the manager of the mine asked blandly.

"Surely you must have heard, sir? The papers are full of it!"

"I have heard nothing. Mr. Linton and I were up here at sunrise, and you can't buy papers in Nant Glaslyn Valley."

"We were informed that Mr. Linton had ridden over here at an early hour," the senior officer said significantly; "but it is pretty certain that our man has not come this way. The fact is, gentlemen, Captain Carrington managed to evade the detectives and get clear away from Woodcroft Castle last night. How he got wind of the proceedings is a mystery! Well, we must be off! And thank you for your kindness, gentlemen!"

After conversing together for a few moments, the policemen mounted their horses and galloped off.

"So far, Carrington is safe," said Reuben Growcott. "You have evidently been under observation, Linton. Material for the novel you are writing—eh? Take my advice, and don't acknowledge Dodgson either by word or look. I will see after his requirements, and, if you

have finished your letter, you had better take the black mare back to Woodcroft. It will soon be noon."

Victor rose slowly from his chair.

"I feel half dazed, Growcott! The worst is over however, and so I will be off. I may not see you again until to-morrow. Then we can talk about this matter." He jerked his hand towards "Bill Dodgson." "And meanwhile you might find him a lighter job. I believe that his shoulder is hurt, and he had a nasty knock on the head last night. His pluck and determination are marvellous! Well, good morning—I'm off!"

"So long!"

Victor left the office and went to the stables and saddled Black Bess, and a minute later galloped away without so much as glancing at "Dodgson." His brain was in a perfect whirl—events had been crowding upon him so quickly of late, and the last one was the most bewildering of all. He had good news for Hilda however, yet he had a depressing weight at his heart which he could not understand.

Black Bess moved with long swinging strides, but it was an hour past noon when the towers of Woodcroft Castle became visible to Linton above the tree-tops. The mare trotted through the winding avenue, and when they entered the courtyard a groom was quickly at her head.

Tom Perrin was standing in the doorway, and as Victor dismounted he called him aside.

"You will need to order a fresh horse, Mr. Linton, if you are in quest of Miss Carrington!" he said a little sternly.

"What are you talking about?"

"Miss Carrington left here hours since, presumably for London!" Perrin's keen eyes were fixed on Victor's face while he spoke. "Ah, I can usually read a man's thoughts when he is taken by surprise, and I see that this is news to you! No—there is not a scrap of writing of any description left for anybody, but I know that the young lady and Mrs. Maxwell the housekeeper left Llanberis by the noon train for London."

Victor was dumbfounded.

"It is all owing to the escape of Captain Carrington. You know all about that, of course, considering that you put him up to it?" The detective's tone was bitter. "I trusted in you."

"Not until you were forced to do so for your own protection!"

"Well, it's of no use going over that; Carrington has got the start, and I shall be called on to the carpet!" He laughed. "From the bottom of my heart, though, I hope that he'll never be heard of again—for his daughter's sake! Don't betray my sentiments! I've scooped in all the others however."

Linton heard only a part of what the detective said. Hilda had gone to London to consult Mr. Molson—he was sure of that. But why had she not first communicated with him? Perhaps he had missed her in some way; perhaps she had telegraphed and there had been some mistake. But there would be either a letter or a telegram at his lodgings! What folly it was to be so easily disturbed—for he had turned first hot and then cold, and then a feeling of faintness had come over him! He would find a full explanation at home.

He told the groom to take Black Bess to the stables forthwith, and to bring him back a fresh horse.

"It will be all right," he said jauntily to Perrin. "Molson may have telegraphed to Miss Carrington—something up with business matters—so much red-tapeism before an estate like this gets through the hands of the authorities."

Ten minutes later he was galloping back to Llanberis at a break-neck speed.

There was no letter at his lodgings.

"The next post doesn't come in till about four o'clock, sir," his landlady told him.

He stabled his horse at the town hostelry, and then walked to the railway-station.

The station-master knew Miss Carrington very well by sight, he said, in answer to Linton's inquiry, and remembered that she and an elderly lady had booked for London about noon.

Victor returned to his lodgings and paced up and down in front of the house until the postman, who was fully half an hour later than usual, arrived. There were two letters for him, and Victor's heart seemed to leap upwards and then stand still as he took them. One was from Harry Mayhew and one from Hilda. The first he thrust into his pocket unopened, the other he read at once, and as he did so his sight became hazy and a sound as of thunder boomed in his ears.

"Am I mad or dreaming?" he muttered. "Hilda gone—fled from me—because she believes that I have killed her father! The poor child is crazy—these troubles have proved too much for her!" Then he became calmer. "But she is in good hands," he reflected, and the thought afforded him some satisfaction.

He went to the telegraph-office and dispatched this message to Molson—

"Miss Carrington has left here under a misapprehension. She will probably call upon you. Don't lose sight of her. I am following immediately. "VICTOR LINTON."

Then he got a time-table. He found that there was no train until eight o'clock; so it would be impossible to see Mr. Molson until the next morning.

Linton returned to his lodgings and wrote a note of explanation to Mr. Growcott, telling him he was obliged to go to London that night. His absence would not however interfere with the operations at the mine—he was not the practical partner. And he could fully rely upon the sagacity of Reuben Growcott as regarded the necessary treatment of "Bill Dodgson."

On his way to the station he met Miss Morgan, and she greeted him with a most malicious smile. Was the news of Hilda's flight already out? Everybody in Llanberis was in a state of excitement. Never before in the history of the ancient town had there been such a sensation among the inhabitants.

At last he took his seat in the train, and his journey was begun.

CHAPTER XXXI.

It was twenty minutes to four o'clock in the morning when Victor Linton arrived at Euston Station.

He went to his mother's house in Euston Square, and had a bath and a change of clothes, which cured his "seediness." Sleep was quite out of the question.

Mrs. Linton herself came down-stairs to learn what had brought her son to London. She was brighter and more cheerful than she had been for weeks.

"I did not think you would go to bed, Victor," she said—"you were always such a boy for sleeping in railway trains!—so I had the library fire made up, and there is a glorious blaze for you. And I have made you a cup of tea and some toast."

Victor drew his chair near to the table.

"What a kind thoughtful mother you are!" he answered tenderly. "Yes, I will have a cup of tea. But you must not lose your rest; I shall be all right now."

Still Mrs. Linton lingered.

"And you won't tell me why you have come to London so unexpectedly? You look pale and worried, Victor! I hope that nothing has gone wrong at the mine? I have felt so happy since learning that your father was all right! I suppose Harry has written suggesting that he should go to Stavanger to your father, and bring him home?"

"Yes, I had the letter to-day; and I heartily approve of the plan. I am too busy myself"—he poured out a second cup of tea—"and I've got a lot of bother besides, with Hilda's people. You have heard a good deal about her rackety father, but not all—there is more to come out. The mine? Oh, yes—it is going on splendidly, and Growcott is sure of a small fortune! Both shafts will be in operation within a week, and the principal element of doubt is gone. The greatest enemy to be fought in a coal-mine is water, but our pit is as dry as the surface."

Mrs. Linton returned to her room, and Victor endeavoured to read,

but found it impossible. Lighting a pipe, he paced up and down in his slippers. Where was Hilda at that moment? Somewhere in London —not very far away perhaps. In any case it would not be very difficult to find her. How mistaken she had been! But, in the circumstances, he could not blame her for the course she had taken. And she had not believed him to be wilfully guilty—that was one comfort. Her relief when he told her that her father lived and was free from the clutches of the law, and that his assailant had been the treacherous Oriental and not himself, would be glorious.

The morning gradually became gray; then there was a gleam of sunlight.

Victor went out into the square to breathe the cool air. How the hours dragged! It would be of no use going to Mr. Molson's office until ten o'clock. He had half hoped that the lawyer would send him some satisfactory reply to Euston Square, but a bitter rivalry had existed for years between the firms of Linton, Son, & Linton and Charles Molson. Indeed Victor suspected that Mr. Molson gloried in the downfall of the older house. His animosity ought not however to be carried into private life!

He heard the postman's sharp "rat-tat" at one of the doors in the square, and he returned to the house. There were no letters for him.

With a keen sense of disappointment, not unmingled with apprehension, he started for Bedford Row—where Mr. Molson's office was. How many times had he run up the same dusty creaking stairs with copies of affidavits and other legal documents!

It was barely nine o'clock yet.

"Mr. Molson, sir?" said the caretaker, who appeared, sweeping-brush in hand, to answer his inquiry. "He don't come early without leavin' me a message a-s'yin' so; an' I ain't got no word about it."

Victor went out again and paced up and down the street. He met several men whom he knew, some of them connected with the legal profession. One of these stopped and held out his hand.

"Haven't seen you for months, Linton! But I hear that you are doing great things. No dreams of silk now, eh?"

"My dreams never soared in that direction, Rivers. Oh, yes—I am doing great things! Look at me! Did you ever see a more perfect picture of success and happiness?"

Rivers became grave.

"You are used up, old man! Come and have a pick-me-up! I have been reading hard lately, and don't feel particularly bright myself. Want to see Molson? Oh, he is a big pot now, and drives to the office in his carriage at ten—never earlier! Nothing like being in with a good set! Coming?"

"I don't mind if I do. Anything to kill time!"

They went to a *café* in a quiet court, patronised mainly by the legal profession, and there they each partook of a cup of black coffee with a dash of cognac in it.

"A delightful tonic after a hard night!" Rivers said. "Now try a cigarette and another coffee; then you will be as fit as a fiddle. I've got a complicated case before the judge in chambers this morning. You were wise to get out of the law, Linton; it isn't what it used to be. The public fight shy of us, and the big merchants are settling disputes by arbitration. When is your governor coming home? Queer his being taken so ill and having to go abroad! He was a fine lawyer!"

Victor stared hard at his companion.

"You know why he went away, and why I have sold the old practice," he said quietly.

Rivers flushed.

"Well, I do not really know, but I have heard that he was in hot water, and that you were bearing the brunt of it. Don't get waxy! You and I were always chums, and I take a personal interest in your welfare; indeed I have shut up the mouths of the gossips more than once. You know how malicious people are!"

"And the 'great things' that you alluded to, Rivers?" asked Victor. "I hope that that was not sarcasm?"

The young barrister looked uncomfortable. He had a sincere regard for Victor Linton, and had once fancied himself in love with Victor's sister. He was well-meaning and most generous, but was a sad blunderer.

"Well, here it is, old man!" he blurted out. "The men are all talking about your luck. They say that you've picked up an heiress somewhere—an ugly woman, double your age—who has paid your governor's debts, or provided you with the means of doing so!"

"And you call that 'great things'?" cried Victor. "My father's

debts will be paid, but not with any one else's money. The sale of a portion of his own property—a share in the Welsh mine—has provided the means to re-open the coal-pits, and to work them effectively. I have never had a shilling from any one except for value received. You may tell that to my kind friends; and, if they want confirmation of the statement, let them go to Mr. Molson. One of his clients is the purchaser of the half share in the mine, and is now my partner. Bad friends as Molson and I have been, he has done this turn for me."

Rivers stared in open-mouthed amazement.

"Why, good heavens, Molson is the man who has set the other story about!"

"Impossible! He knows that it is absolutely false."

"I'm sorry I spoke—by Jove I am! I brought you here because you looked so used up, and intended to cheer you a bit. Just my luck to make a mess of it! But you take my hint, and watch Molson! There the old fox goes!"—pointing through the window.

"Then good morning, Rivers!" said Victor. "He's the man I am after."

They parted at the door of the *café*, and Linton followed Mr. Molson's carriage. He went up-stairs almost on the heels of the lawyer, and a clerk showed him immediately into the lawyer's room.

It was then that the interview took place in which the lawyer declined to give Linton any information about Miss Carrington beyond the bare fact that she was in London, and at which he expressed his opinion that the heiress was "evidently repenting of her choice," and told him that she had been financing that coal-mine, that Growcott had never had a shilling in his life, and was a visionary. He informed the young man further that he himself had heartily approved of the plan, because he knew that the money put into the mine would be lost, and that thus a wider gulf would be created between Victor and Miss Carrington.

Linton's first impulse as the interview closed was to knock the lawyer down; indeed he wondered if it would really be a crime to kill such a man. The impulse was mastered however, and, turning, Victor walked out of the office and back to Euston Square.

"Hilda's money—Hilda's money!" he kept thinking. And Reuben Growcott a mere visionary—a clever man, but a failure! Yes, the money was all spent by this time—Hilda's money. And, if things went

as Molson had so confidently and maliciously predicted, his indebtedness would be doubled.

On reaching home he went to his room. But it seemed stifling. Hilda was in London, and he must find her; a few words and all would be set right—except as to the horrid money! He understood Captain Carrington's innuendoes now; and he understood Reuben Growcott's hitherto enigmatical speech.

Out into the square he went again, and made for the nearest telegraph-office. Harry Mayhew would help him. A message was despatched to Mayhew, and an hour later Mayhew himself dashed up to Euston Square in a hansom.

His eyes flashed and his hands were clenched as he listened to Victor's story.

"Why didn't you kick the villain?" he growled. "But no matter! Miss Carrington is a girl of sound sense, and she will think again. And how she must care for you, old chap, to do what she has done! We'll find her; we'll go to all the hotels, and we will advertise and employ detectives, and—find her!"

And all the while Hilda was within a hundred yards of Euston Square!

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE weeks went by, and to Victor Linton years of misery and anxiety seemed to be crowded into them. Ten days after Miss Carrington and her companion left the Beaconsfield Hotel a detective, who had succeeded in tracing her so far, called at the hotel, only to be informed however that Hilda and her companion had left early one morning with an elderly gentleman, and that nothing further was known about them; and at this point the detective lost all clue.

Once Victor had met Mr. Molson in the streets of London, and had seized hold of him so roughly that the lawyer had threatened to give him into custody for assault.

For a whole month Linton had not been to Nant Glaslyn Valley, but he eagerly read every bit of news contained in Reuben Growcott's daily budget, his one thought being the fate of Hilda's money. The machinery of the mine was in full working order, and hundreds of tons of earth had been brought to the surface. Captain Carrington was working with the colliers.

The elder Mr. Linton returned home a broken man; nevertheless he still had dreams of redeeming the past.

"No coal yet—no coal yet!" he would say. "What a terrible thing is this gambling fever! And it is nothing else but gambling. Suppose the money doesn't hold out, Victor? I lost thirty thousand altogether—my own and other people's money! But then I had the cost of sinking the shafts. If there is any prospect of coal—any certainty—you can borrow what money you want—you and Growcott."

"Not a penny!" Victor answered resolutely. "As it is, we shall be upwards of twenty thousand pounds to the bad, father. I am getting tired of Growcott's rosy letters; he never dreams of failure. And Molson said that he was a mere visionary."

The very next morning however Victor received from his partner this letter—

"My dear Linton—I am simply bubbling over with joy, and sorely need you at the works to restrain me from going mad. We have struck the seam, and fifty tons of coal are at the pit's-mouth—coal of the very best quality! A million tons more are below, just for the getting! The find is only just in the nick of time however, for I paid only half-wages last week, and haven't a feather left to fly with. Under my agreement with Miss Carrington, who is your partner in reality, I am to have fifty per cent. of her net profits. My fortune is made, though my enemies have laughed at me and called me a fool!

"Yours hysterically, "REUBEN GROWCOTT."

"P.S.—Isn't it about time we dispensed with the services of Dodgson? He is a bit restive, and wants to see you; he will want money, I'm sure. All the needful we require will be furnished now by the bank at Llanberis. I intended asking you about mortgaging the machinery, but now the need is past."

"Hilda's money is safe!" was Victor's first thought.

He handed the letter to his father, and John Linton seemed to grow younger while he read it.

"There will be enough here for all, and I shall face the world again, my boy! You will let me go to Nant Glaslyn with you? I am only in my prime as years count in a man's life, and there will be plenty for me to do."

Harry Mayhew was sent for, and the news was imparted to him.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "this will be a knock-down blow for Molson!"

John and his son went to Nant Glaslyn Valley by the first available train. At Llanberis almost the first person to meet them was the Rector, who ran forward impulsively and seized Victor's hand.

"Let me congratulate you, Linton!" he said heartily. "Your success is the talk of the place—the papers are full of it!"

"Hilda's money is safe," thought Victor—"and also my father's honour."

"You are looking desperately ill!" continued Mr. Jarvis in an undertone. "But all will come right in the end. You have no news?"

"None."

"Miss Carrington was always a strong-willed passionate girl, but she

is thoroughly good at heart. She knows how to take care of herself too, so that I am sure no harm will befall her. Besides, Mrs. Maxwell is a capable woman. As to the affair at Woodcroft Castle, it is almost forgotten. Ah, this is your father! Why, Linton, I did not recognise you! Five-and-twenty years since we met last!"

"You have altered very little, Jarvis," John Linton answered. "If I had known, when we talked of the coal-fields twenty-five years ago, how long I should have to wait to see my hopes realised——" He sighed; the stern hard-headed man of the world had become as meek as a child.

Victor and his father were driven to Nant Glaslyn Valley, and Reuben Growcott, his face blackened with grime, came out of the office to meet them as the fly drove up.

"What do you think of the works now?" he said joyously. "A complete metamorphosis—eh? Vandalism—eh? See over there! Half a hundred men and boys screening the coal—our coal! Merchants have already been to see it, and orders are booked for thousands of tons. Do you hear the machinery? So much for your visionary—your man in the clouds! So much for the pluck and devotion of a woman, bless her!" The engineer was as enthusiastic as a schoolboy. "And I must not forget the energy and enterprise of the originator of it all!" He took off his cap to John Linton.

They went into the office, and talked of Bill Dodgson.

"He is worried about you and his daughter," Reuben Growcott said, turning to Victor. "The fellow is not without heart. The work is beginning to tell upon him, though, and he is talking of getting away. He wants a hundred pounds or so, and we can find him that now. I don't know what his scheme is, but there is no doubt that he knows his book, as the sportsmen say. I have kept him informed upon all necessary points—and he goes regularly to the alehouse at Llanberis with his mates. Obeying your instructions, I went to Woodcroft and saw Mrs. Carrington. She is a most remarkable woman! And she has the utmost faith in him still."

Dodgson was sent for, and at sight of Victor he almost broke down.

"I wonder you can bear to touch my hand!" he said remorsefully.

"You are Hilda's father! Well, I have moved heaven and earth—without avail. And she is suffering too; but she will come back to me some day."

There was a brief pause. Growcott and John Linton had left them alone.

"I hear that you are tired of this, Carrington," Victor said presently. "It must be hard for you."

"It might have been worse—penal servitude! I have enjoyed the work really. But I think it is time that I moved, both for my own sake and for my wife's. My plans are formed, and I have confidence in myself. If you can let me have some money——"

"A hundred pounds to-morrow."

"Thank you! And I shall want you to bear all my messages to my wife. Anything addressed to her through the post would be opened by the police before delivery. Letters sent to your London address will be safe enough."

"I will assist you right through, Carrington."

"Then I am satisfied." The tears trickled down Carrington's grimy face. "What a splendid fellow you are!"

"Growcott will give you the money to-morrow. And I will see your wife at Woodcroft this evening. What shall I say to her?"

"Tell her that I am safe, and shall send for her in a month or two. She will be quite satisfied; she knows that I am not friendless while a heart like yours beats. Hilda will come back again—poor girl!—and you and she will be as happy as you deserve to be. Oh, I would give ten years of my life only to see her once more, and have her forgiveness for the awful trouble that has followed in my train! Shake hands, Linton, and believe me when I say that I cried for joy when the first lumps of coal fell before the pick! I brought them down, and I should have died happy if they had crushed me to death! Shake hands!"

"It may be for the last time, Carrington," Victor answered, with emotion. "I am going back to London to continue my search for Hilda; my father will remain here."

An hour or so later Victor was driven away. He looked back once and saw that Carrington was waving his hand to him. There were many of the workmen about, and such familiarity between the miner, Bill Dodgson, and one of his employers might have been commented upon but for the fact that Dodgson was the man who had brought down the first lump of coal.

Victor went to Woodcroft Castle and saw Mrs. Carrington. A detective was still stationed there—a fact which the young man viewed with strong disapprobation; but if Molson did not protest it was not in his power to interfere. No doubt the detective would stay as long as Mrs. Carrington made Woodcroft her home.

His interview with the captain's wife was very brief.

"I knew the poor dear would beat them—he's so clever!" she said, when Victor had told her about her husband. "You say he's well, sir?"

"Quite well. But it is possible that you may not hear from him again for some weeks. Whenever the news comes to you I shall be the bearer of it. I should advise you to leave Woodcroft in a day or two, and go to London; it will be safer for all concerned."

Mrs. Carrington considered for a moment.

"I'll do as you say, sir. But I must tell Mr. Molson, because of the money he allows me."

"Not a word to Molson!" Victor said. "That man is our enemy! I will supply you with all the money you need."

Soon after the interview was over Victor was speeding back to town. He could not rest away from home, where the first news of Hilda was sure to be received. Advertisements were appearing in all the leading foreign newspapers, and she must see them sooner or later.

So two months more dragged wearily by. The new year had seen a continuation of their prosperity, and it was now an accepted fact that the great coal mine in Nant Glaslyn Valley was one of the most valuable in the world. Already Victor had paid a substantial portion of what was due to General Mayhew, and a reconciliation all round had followed.

Bill Dodgson had disappeared, after an apparently sharp quarrel with Reuben Growcott. To the miners this was a mere incident, and in a week he was forgotten by them. He had lingered about Llanberis for a day or two, and then tramped off to find work elsewhere, and not a word had been heard of him since.

Winter merged into spring. The trees were bursting into leaf; the winds were soft and mild, the skies were blue, and the birds sang their songs of glorious promise. Then it was that Victor Linton received a letter from abroad, and his spirit was attuned to their music and gladness.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MR. MOLSON had been right when he said that two ladies could travel the length and breadth of the United States without attracting any particular attention.

The ship on which "Miss Stansfield" and her companion had embarked made a delightful passage out. New friendships were formed by the ladies which were destined to be life-long. On the very first day of the voyage an American clergyman, having noticed "Miss Stansfield's" preoccupied air and mournful look, addressed her with the courteous freedom characteristic of his countrymen.

"You are going to New York, Miss Stansfield?" he said respectfully. "Are you going to remain there for very long? Oh, I heard the stewardess call you by name, and we dispense with formalities on board ship! I don't see your lady friend this morning. Sick, is she? I'm real sorry to hear that! If I can be of any use to you, I shall be pleased."

"Thank you—no!" "Miss Stansfield" answered rather coldly. She was suspicious of everybody. "I am travelling for pleasure."

"Pleasure? I shouldn't have believed it if you hadn't said so! Well, I expect we shall have you in New York for a while, if that's the case, and I may be able to see you fixed at a good hotel, and to direct you generally as regards the sights of our city. My name is Halstead, and I'm minister of an Episcopal church in Jersey City. I've been to Europe on my holiday, and I think I've done it pretty thoroughly in a month, but I got so homesick I came back before my holidays had expired, intending to stay for a while in New York!"

"Done Europe in a month?" murmured "Miss Stansfield." "You must have seen very little!"

"I expect there's nothin' worth seeing that I haven't seen. It's a miserable place, after America!"

"Miss Stansfield" felt that she disliked Mr. Halstead, but she made no reply.

"You will say that there's nothing in the Old Country equal to New York," he went on cheerfully.

"I shall say nothing of the kind!" she returned with some asperity.

"You've got no natural scenery, and your buildings are ugly and squatty!"

"Oh, I can't agree with that!" She had visions of the wild beauty of Llanberis.

"You just wait until you reach New York, Miss Stansfield. You are cold. Shall I get your wraps—or have you got a waterproof? The wind brings a lot of spray along this morning."

She declined Mr. Halstead's kindly offices, and went below, feeling that she detested Americans.

The next day Mr. Halstead sought her again, and she gradually began to find amusement in his conversation, and to like the man. He told her of his early struggles, of his wife and little daughter, and she found that at heart he was an honest and chivalrous gentleman. Once she discovered herself laughing heartily at his exaggerated ideas of America and Americans, but this only pleased Mr. Halstead.

Upon reaching New York he assisted "Miss Stansfield" and her companion to get their luggage expeditiously through the hands of the customs officials. He then suggested an hotel in Twenty-Third Street.

"Real handy for everything!" he explained. "Nice people and moderate charges! And I am going to stay there myself a couple of weeks before going home—if the Indian summer lasts out the time. I might pilot you and Mrs. Maxwell around, if you don't mind. At all events, you must not miss going to Central Park—it's as big as all your public parks in England put together!"

So they accompanied Mr. Halstead to the Adelphi Hotel, in Twenty-Third Street, and "Miss Stansfield" almost forgot her misery in the novelty of the situation.

"Am I completely heartless?" she asked herself. "How can I find pleasure in anything? But I must not think—I dare not!"

The weather was perfect, the sunshine being brilliant, the sky a cloudless blue, and the softest of winds tempering the heat. The streets too were thronged with beauty and fashion.

"This is New York at its best," Mr. Halstead said, "In the summer

months it is so hot that all the rich folk get out of it—to the mountains, or the seaside, or to Europe. Now what do you think of America, Miss Stansfield?"

"Oh, I like it very much!" she answered, laughing.

Mr. Halstead smiled.

"I have sent for my wife and daughter," he told her; "the change will please them. You never saw such a girl as my Jean—too 'cute for anything!"

The hotel was so quiet and homelike that "Miss Stansfield" and her companion lingered until the Indian summer was gone, and the winds of winter blew an icy blast.

"I think that it will be best to stay here until the spring," Hilda said one day to her companion. "We are thoroughly comfortable."

"Just as you like, my dear," the other answered.

Then followed a long spell of weariness, for the snow lay deep on the ground, and people said that it was the most severe winter that had visited America since the year when nearly all of the great cities were snow-bound for weeks.

Letters came from Mr. Molson regularly, but they were merely communications as between lawyer and client. He reported upon matters strictly relative to the estate of Woodcroft, and nothing more. Once "Miss Stansfield" asked for news of the mine at Nant Glaslyn, but Mr. Molson apparently overlooked the question, as no reply was forthcoming.

Christmas came and went, and a sorry Christmas it was! With the new year the weather improved, and "Miss Stansfield" and her companion accepted an invitation from Mr. Halstead and his wife to spend a few weeks with them. Then the Halsteads came to New York, and the party went sleighing in Central Park, and flying to the tinkling of the bells along the magnificent drives that run parallel to the beautiful Hudson River.

At last the frost king vanished, and "Miss Stansfield" determined to resume her travels.

"I am tired of New York," she said to Mrs. Maxwell—"I am tired of everything now that spring is here. Oh, for the soft winds and the fragrant hedgerows of England! I dare not let my thoughts run back lest my heart should fail me. And I must have news of home—news of

the mine—news of England! I shall cable to Mr. Molson to-day—and then we will go anywhere."

Later the same day she found herself laughing immoderately at a recitation which one of the guests was giving in the public drawing-room. Yet her heart was breaking the while!

"We leave to-morrow," she said to Mrs. Maxwell the next morning; "but I have not yet decided where to go. To-day we will have a last walk in Central Park. Oh, I pine so for the country!"

The morning was beautifully fine, and the birds twittered gaily in the budding trees. Hundreds of people were out enjoying the sweetness of spring.

As "Miss Stansfield" and her companion were turning in the direction of the lake, a tall man came from behind a statue in the Belvedere. For a moment his features became convulsed, and he passed his slender fingers through a mass of jet-black hair. Then he followed them, and a deep quivering sigh passed his lips as, with a swift swinging step, he strode by the ladies.

They paused to gaze at the lake. He stopped also.

Then he turned, and, fixing his eyes upon "Miss Stansfield's" pale face, whispered one word—

"Hilda!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"HILDA!" repeated the stranger who had followed "Miss Stansfield" and her companion. He held out his hands to Hilda appealingly. "My daughter!"

The girl's face blanched, and she shook in every limb. Were her senses leaving her? She clutched at Mrs. Maxwell's arm, and Mrs. Maxwell gazed wonder-stricken at the man.

"Your daughter?" she said contemptuously. "And who are you, pray?"

He ignored her question.

"Yes, my child, it is I—Vane Carrington—in the flesh! Look into my eyes—you must know that I speak the truth! Madam"—he turned to Mrs. Maxwell—"I am placing my life and liberty in your hands! I know you, and you will be faithful to my child—you will not betray me, for my child's sake. But we must not talk here. Come—I have learnt to know this place!"

He drew one of Hilda's arms within his own, and she did not resist him. Had he risen from the dead?

"You are trembling, my child, but you have nothing to fear. And I have news for you—glorious news!" He laughed like a schoolboy. "I have been watching you for days and days, and you have not known it. I do not look like the Vane Carrington who came to lord it at Woodcroft. My moustache is gone, my skin is stained, and my hair is dyed—that is all."

He walked into a refreshment-room, and, having chosen a quiet corner, ordered tea for the ladies. Mrs. Maxwell sat a little apart from them.

"You are sure that I am Vane Carrington, Hilda?" he asked, half jestingly. He could jest now.

"I know it," she answered simply. "But I am completely mystified. I saw you struck; I heard you plunged into that terrible lake!"

"Yes—and you believed my assailant to be your lover! How could you, Hilda?"

"How could I? Why, you had threatened each other——"

"It was the Indian—my evil genius!" he interrupted. "But I was not dead—only half stunned—and I escaped. I am here—free, hopeful and happy! Happy, because I shall be the means of restoring you to Victor Linton! I escaped, though hemmed in almost at every point by the police. You wonder how? Well, fortune favoured me—and Victor Linton. I worked as a collier in the mine at Nant Glaslyn for many weeks; then Victor provided me with money; and I am here, but not without having had adventures which would fill a book—I cannot relate them now. I shall start anew when my wife knows where to find me. And now I ask my daughter's forgiveness."

The tears were streaming from Hilda's eyes.

"My poor father!" she murmured.

"I am satisfied—I am a new man! And now for more good news! The mine is making a fortune for everybody concerned. But, unless you go back to England at once, Victor will die of a broken heart. It is hard upon him—terribly hard!"

Carrington told his daughter many things, and she listened with charmed ears.

"I laughed last night," she thought, "while my heart was breaking. I am happy now, and my eyes are filled with tears."

"The hand of Providence is in this," resumed Captain Carrington, "or why should I have come to New York and found you? For weeks I have been wandering from State to State, with the haunting dread that I was being shadowed by the police; and I have not yet had the courage to write to Victor Linton, for him to communicate with my wife. The greatest danger lies in Mrs. Carrington's following me."

He spoke gloomily for a moment.

"I am an outcast—and I deserve it. But it is hard—very hard! Still, I had never dreamed of such happiness as this. Heaven knows that it was my dearest wish to see you again, to hear you say that you forgave me! And now for the immediate future," he added cheerfully. "Will you leave the arrangements to me? I want to send Victor the good news; I want him to associate something pleasant with me."

"Yes, father, I leave it to you entirely."

"Then I shall write to him to-day—it would not be wise to cable, for several reasons—and he will get my letter a little while before you reach England. I will send it by to-morrow's mail, and you can follow on Saturday. Perhaps you would like to enclose a letter with mine?"

Hilda glanced at him tearfully—in her emotion she could not speak.

* * * * * *

It was a bulky letter which Victor Linton received from abroad. It was mid-day, and he was smoking out of doors in the little garden behind the house when it arrived. The sun was warm, the air fresh and sweet, even in Euston Square. His face was thinner, and there were lines under his weary eyes.

"I must have a run to Llanberis," he had just decided. "I cannot endure this inactivity and suspense much longer."

The housemaid was at his elbow with a letter. He took it mechanically; then his eyes rested upon the foreign postage stamps, and a faint colour sprang into his cheeks.

"Carrington!" he thought. "By Jove, that man is a marvel!"

He opened the envelope, and a smaller one fell out, together with Carrington's letter, which read—

"My dear Victor—My joy is supreme, because I am able to return good for good—to you whom I have wronged equally with my daughter. I am in New York, and have been here for days and days. I went to France, and thence sailed to Buenos Ayres; but I could never get rid of the notion that the police were on my track, so I travelled from place to place until I reached the States, and finally landed in New York, where I met my darling daughter—Hilda." Victor's hands shook, and he gasped. "I feel the hand of Providence is in all this. I cannot go into details; Hilda will tell you everything. She is following this letter, aboard the *Lucania*, which is due two days after this." Victor waved the missive in the air, and nearly danced. "Now, my dear boy, just assure my long-suffering wife that I am safe, and will send for her soon. I dare not do it yet, lest her movements should be followed. To lose my liberty now would kill me. And the scandal must not be raked up again."

Victor, in a transport of joy, then read Hilda's tiny note.

"My Dearest—I am coming home at once, and I want you to meet me at Liverpool. I shall leave here on Saturday, in the *Lucania*. Thank Heaven, the clouds are lifting! My father has told me everything. Now for dear old England, and my darling! "HILDA."

Victor's first sane action was to tell his mother the delightful news; and then he sent off several telegrams, one of which was to Harry Mayhew. In response, Harry and his "sweet little wife," Marian, hurried in a hansom to Euston Square.

"And now I suppose there will be an early wedding?" said Harry, after the rapturous congratulations were over. "Dash it, this is more like romance than reality! It beats ours, out and out!" He kissed Marian tenderly. "But I feel jolly sorry for poor old Carrington! He's been a reckless sort of fool, you know, but there are plenty of men who can't help it at some period in their lives. They are born that way, and it is not altogether their fault. Couldn't we do something for him?"

"He will receive an ample allowance."

"I don't mean that. My idea is to appeal to the authorities. My governor has a tremendous amount of influence; and he was saying the other day that Captain Vane Carrington had been a dashing soldier in his time, and had a big record for bravery and all that. Then there are his brother's services to the Crown to be considered—and Sir John was once a great power. It's all in the family, and the governor wants to do something, after his shabby treatment of us young folk."

"Is it possible?" Victor's eyes shone. "How it would please Hilda!"

"The governor says it is quite possible after the evidence against that nigger prince. And, for the sake of the memory of Sir John Carrington, the name will not be dragged in the mire."

"Then I will leave it entirely to General Mayhew."

It was Thursday, and the *Lucania* was not due until Saturday, but Victor went to Liverpool that evening.

* * * * * *

Hilda Carrington and Victor Linton were married in London within a month of Hilda's return from New York. It was a quiet wedding. The Rector of Llanberis assisted at the ceremony.

The happy couple went abroad, and almost the first news they received from England was from Harry Mayhew. General Mayhew

and other influential friends were in a position to assure Mrs. Linton that no action would be taken against her father, and that it would be perfectly safe for him to live quietly in England.

In the autumn Victor and his wife came home. They rented a house in town while a new and commodious mansion was being erected for them in Wales. The Castle had been entirely demolished, the lake filled in, and the ruined tower swept away; and with its final disappearance had vanished also the legends of Ogof Llech!

THE END.

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